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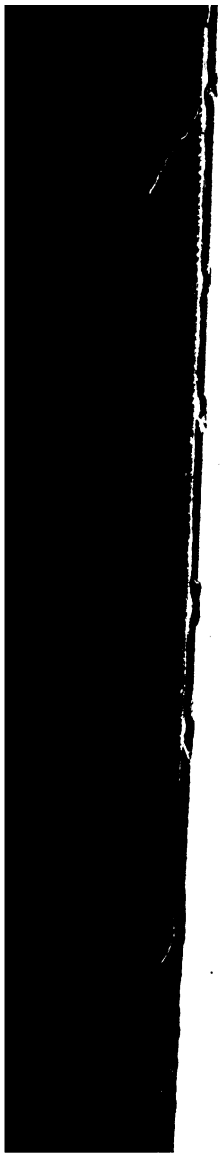

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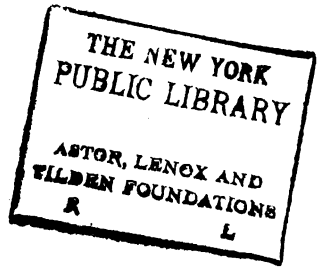

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"For a second stood and looked in."

The Cahusac Mystery

BY

K. AND HESKETH PRICHARD

AUTHORS OF "DON Q," ETC., ETC.

New York

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THE CAHUSAC MYSTERY

THE CAHUSAC MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

YOUNG MALCOLM

In a modern book of reference some such entry as the following might have been written under the name of the hero of this story:

"CAHUSAC. Malcolm John Cardros, son of the late Sir Malcolm Cahusac K.C.M.G., and of Emily Fane y.d., of David F. Cardros of Philadelphia, U. S. A. Educated Harrow, Trinity Coll., Cambridge and University of Pennsylvania. Address, 241 Park Lane. Clubs, Junior Carlton, M.C.C.."

In another and an older volume, belonging to this series which may be regarded in the light of a national possession, it might be interesting to turn up the entry relating to the Sir Malcolm above-mentioned, and there you would find a record of one of those distinguished British careers, which, starting in family influence, and guided by individual character and ability, float serenely on until they find anchorage in the British Embassy of St. Petersburg or of Berlin. Sir Malcolm in his day passed through the moulding of Harrow and Cambridge, close upon which followed his entrance into the Diplomatic Service; within three years he be-

came 3rd Secretary, then was successively appointed Attaché to the Embassy in Paris, then Washington, Paris again, after which the Foreign Office claimed him. Being now a widower he married for the second time the Hon. Dorothea Lewton, only daughter of the tenth Baron Luxillin. So far he had run the race of many predecessors. But a couple of volumes later we find his record closed with the unusual words, "Found murdered in London, on the night of March 9th, 1881."

A bald statement, yet one which in spite of its brevity must flash a picture upon the imagination. In the dark hours of a March night — in the multitudinous city — found murdered. By whose hand? For what motive? In what circumstances?

An inquiry among his contemporaries might bring some such answer as this: "Malcolm Cahusac? Yes, knew him well, brilliant fellow. I was staying with the Dorrows in Worcestershire at the time. Remember how shocked we all were when the London papers came in. Bricklayer found him lying dead under the railings in Park Lane, stabbed in the back, between the shoulders. The murderer hanged? No! Fools of police never laid hands on him. Little to go upon, you know, no motive, no clue, one of the mysteries of London as the newspapers said. I recall the whole affair perfectly. Liberal Government in at the time, too — No, no, of course, no connection, but when the reins of authority are loosened, why, anything may happen!"

If you had heard some remarks of this kind you would, as a matter of fact, know very nearly as much about his father's death as did young Malcolm Cahusac himself on the spring morning when he sat in the Cunard express, staring out at the stations, each greyer than the last, through which they roared on the final stage of the run from Liverpool to London.

Hitherto, life had been very kind to Malcolm, the son. A boyhood spent along the Northumbrian hills, much of it passed by choice in the lone company of the woods and moors and streams; bred to a fine knowledge of all field sports by those who for generations had served his family; happy if rather idle school-days, and the awaking to intellectual life at Cambridge, which culminated in an unexpectedly brilliant degree. Then the plunge into the entirely new environment on the other side of the Atlantic. He could barely imagine that only a year ago he had left England, half unwillingly, to learn something of his kinsfolk across the water. And now through the rhythmic rattle of the wheels he seemed to hear again,

> "But Harvard may have her crimson,
> Yale her colours too.
> But for dear Pennsylvania,
> We wear the red and blue."

Ah, well! it was over now! His smile ended in a perceptible sigh. A youngish man with a shrunk figure and blanched locks among his black hair, sitting

at the further end of the Pullman, caught the expression on Malcolm's face and sighed too with a querulous impatience.

"What has he to sigh for? A good-looking young beggar with health and the world before him!" he complained to the companion at his side.

The girl followed her husband's glance and, because her life was merged in his curiously suffering life, she wondered also. For the luxurious sorrows of youth were almost unknown to Lorrie Madesson; real troubles fallen early to her lot had usurped her thoughts.

Many a man might have envied Malcolm Cahusac as he sat leaning back with folded arms, his grey eyes following the flying landscape. Well-bred, well-born, he owned a sinewy figure too spare for dull nerves, and a high-featured face, which if a trifle over hawk-like, possessed distinction, and his mouth with its fine sculptured lips was almost faultless.

As if becoming aware of their glances, Malcolm turned his head towards the Madessons and then began to make his way across the car. He had spent a good deal of time in their company on the voyage, he was always ready to help Sir Guy to or from his chair and would listen with interest to the invalid's clever carping at life.

He had rather interested Lorrie Madesson. He was so young for his age, one could not imagine he had ever known a care, and this attracted her for below his easy acceptance of life, she knew intuitively

there lay a powerful and sensitive character, latent now but which if awakened should work out to some fine issue. All who knew Malcolm recognised his manliness, his strength of will, his almost exaggerated sense of honour; as to his mental equipment that had been tested by the brilliancy of his degrees, but few would have given him credit for the deeper qualities of character.

"Nearly there," said Malcolm, dropping into a seat. "I hope you are not very tired, Lady Madesson?"

She shook her head, then flashed an involuntary glance at her husband.

Guy Madesson caught the look with a wry smile. "Of course I am tired, but we will try not to advertise the fact," he said, laughing a little.

The laugh had a cranky echo that always touched young Malcolm with a passing spasm of pity for the ambitious man, whose nerves, jangled by some freakish disease, had lost him a splendid career. Yes, he pitied him often enough, yet never gave a thought to the fate of the woman in the first bloom of life who was chained to that broken mate. Had there been anyone to mark it, this single fact would have contributed largely to the conception of Lorrie Madesson's character at that time. For she was singularly lovely, though not according to the ethereal type of so many of her country-women. Her face though oval was strong about the jaws and chin in the imperial mould of Rome, her brown hair rippled from her brow, her eyes of a dark and vivid blue were of a

shade always rare and more often seen in men than women. She was tall and her slim full outlines pointed the contrast of the wizened shape at her side. Had such a girl, by so much as a glance, appealed for outside sympathy, the response must have been unfailing; but as a matter of fact, it had never struck Malcolm that she needed sympathy for she was always ready to smile and be gay without any show of that laboured cheerfulness which must surely be the chief trial of many in Madesson's case. Could Malcolm have seen through the covers of a book that lay in her travelling bag, he might have read a quotation written on a margin.

> "Wanted, volunteers,
> To do their best for two score years."

The words were an odd help to Lorrie Madesson, for Guy's razor tongue was only sharpened to greater bitterness because of his morbid brooding over the hardness of her lot, and perhaps also a little because it was her wealth, not his own, that supplied the ameliorations and comforts which surrounded him.

The three chatted together for a few moments, and Cahusac hoped it would not be long before they met again.

Lorrie Madesson looked at him in her direct radiant way.

"I think I shall always be glad to see you," she said, "even when you have become a part of the feudal system."

Malcolm raised his brows.

"The feudal system?"

"Yes, the life England offers to people like you. It would have been better to remain in the States."

"Why?"

"Because a ready-made niche in England is like a competency to a genius, apt to induce arrested growth."

Madesson's crooked smile stopped her. "My wife's republican principles forbid her to believe that a certain amount of dry-nursing is not unknown in her native country," he remarked, and went on to ask questions about Malcolm's future.

Yes, Malcolm replied, it was to be the Foreign Office; he had passed the necessary exams. And, yes, the "niche" was, he supposed waiting for him, as his stepmother had cabled him to come home.

"You will follow in your father's steps?" said Madesson.

"I hope so," answered Malcolm, but a dark look settled on his face. The question recalled the old unexplained tragedy which he had half forgotten during the moving years now closed.

Madesson read his thought. He showed little of his malady while seated save by an occasional jerk of hand or foot, but at this moment, his foot shot out violently and touched Cahusac. Irritated by the incident, Madesson could not control an outbreak of his sneering humour.

"Do you expect to solve the mystery of his death?"

he asked, raising his chin derisively. "Bah! I'll back London to keep her secret."

Lorrie's eyes flashed; she caught Malcolm's look of hurt surprise, then she bit her lip and the colour paled a little in her face. She must let it pass, another instance of her husband's privileged ill-temper.

Fortunately the train was already steaming into Euston and the bustle and crush of arrival intervened. People in groups drifted along the platform, threaded through by a zigzag brown velvet ribbon of porters.

A footman in dark livery came up to Malcolm.

"Hello, Andrew!"

"I hope you're well, Master Malcolm — beg pardon, sir."

"All right, thanks. Luggage in the rear van."

Malcolm Cahusac moved off to bid good-bye to one or two people, helped a trio of ladies to winnow their belongings from a mass of baggage, and then stood beside the brougham till his own should be collected. While he waited, he saw Lady Madesson emerge from the train, followed by her husband, who was dexterously landed on the platform by his man. Then with a stick in one hand and an umbrella in the other, Madesson started to cross the space to the low-hung carriage drawn up opposite. His shuffling, uncertain, jointless action brought a grin to many a face round him. Sir Guy kept his eyes down for it needed every shred of energy left to him to reach the haven of the open door in front. But he was acutely aware of the ghastly comedy of the spectacle he presented.

A great compassion strengthened Lorrie for the ordeal of the drive which she knew lay ahead.

"Curse it all! Look at that rag doll!" jeered one of two men who stood near Malcolm. "How did he ever persuade her to marry him?"

His companion stopped to consider the scene, then showed the cockney's knowledge of life. "He'll make her a duchess if he lives long enough. That's Mawdson."

"Dry up!" growled the first, as Lady Madesson, leaving her husband in his carriage, walked past them to Malcolm Cahusac and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said; "we both thank you for giving us your help so often on board."

Malcolm, still remembering Sir Guy's last speech, coldly professed himself glad to think he had been able to be of use.

The colour of her eyes seemed to darken, she understood and was sorry for him but it was hard to put what she wished to convey into words. She hesitated, then, "Can you not forgive — us?" she said and turned away without leaving him time to answer.

Malcolm drove off, and while he watched the life of the streets, he was thinking of Lorrie. He had never thought much about her before, but now he realised that although she was younger than himself, she had appraised him silently as a woman appraises possibilities in a boy. He felt suddenly dashed by the conviction of her intangible clarity of vision. He had believed himself a man, yet now he blushed for his

own incompleteness, his immaturity, for like all young males he desired a little worship or at the least a little blindness in those about him.

Then his mind was turned into another channel for as the brougham stood held up amongst a mass of vehicles at the Marble Arch to allow of the passage of a stream of riders and carriages from the Park, he caught sight of a young girl on horseback followed by a groom. She was very fair with a child's purity of glance and complexion, her long hair hung in flaxen waves to her waist, and Malcolm pushed his head far out of the window to follow her slender figure as she trotted away.

"By Jove, she's prettier than ever, dear little Alice!" he exclaimed half aloud and wandered off into recollections that brought a smile and a very gentle look to his face.

It was April and all the fulness of the spring was come. A flood of sunshine poured itself abroad, striking strong notes of colour from the young green of the trees and the long flower beds with their dominant yellows and blues of blossom. The call of the spring warmed his blood, the beauty and the mystery of life stirred in his veins, his eyes filled with a dim vision of the future, vague and undefined, but it held a promise, surely it held a promise of something far above the common lot, glorious, satisfying.

The carriage turned out of the sunshine, stopped, and in another moment Malcolm was holding Lady Cahusac's hand. As he stooped his stepmother kissed

him on the forehead with the frigid kiss he had half forgotten.

"I am glad you have come home, Malcolm," she said.

CHAPTER II

LADY CAHUSAC BREAKS SILENCE

It is curious how at times a remark or a question gains a haunting quality and recurs insistively. These mental echoes are rarely pleasant. Such was Malcolm's experience as he sat in an armchair before the fire in his bedroom somewhere about 7 o'clock the same evening.

By rights his mind should have been occupied with his home-coming, with the uplifting of such hopes as he had felt when he drove down Park Lane. Yet it was not so. With Lady Cahusac's greeting, the happy mood had fallen from him. She looked extremely ill and he was glad he had not delayed in obeying her recall. He thought a little of this and reverted with a half smile to a legend in his family concerning a certain ancestor, one Leaf who had harried the coasts of Northumberland before the centuries of Christ passed into two figures. This Leaf, tradition said, had loved the daughter of a contemporary Jarl of Northumbria, and being surprised with her in a serf's hut in the forest, was there slain after a fight which gave material to the harps of Minstrels for decades. The story went that as he stood up for his death-battle, he sang and prophesied, foretelling things which

after came to pass. And tradition held that the blood of the Viking translated itself in the veins of his descendants into a susceptibility which was less than foreknowledge and yet more than mere suggestion. Malcolm had long thrown off his childish belief in the superstition, yet it cannot be denied that it recurred to him when on this night of his home-coming he fell a prey to acute low spirits. But it was not the legend of Leaf which compelled his attention, which troubled him like a persistent tapping at the back of his mind. He was haunted by the last words Madesson had spoken.

"Do you expect to solve the mystery of his death? Bah! I'll back London to keep her secret." He strove without success to turn to some pleasanter train of thought, but these words knocked persistently like unwelcome visitors at the door until Malcolm, outwearied by their importunity, admitted them.

Did he expect to solve the mystery? Had he in truth set any such purpose before himself as a part of the design of his manhood? To this he could answer both yes and no. Years ago, boy-like, he was filled with the ambition of revenging his father when he should be old enough. Afterwards the hurrying interests of his life had thrust both the tragedy and the desire behind them. But to-day the remembrance sprang forth again and challenged him.

After all what did he even now know of the circumstances of Sir Malcolm's death. Little enough. The question followed, how was it that he knew so little?

His mind began to cast backwards. Had his stepmother ever spoken of it? With a shock Malcolm realised that she never had — not one word. Why? — perhaps her silence was hardly surprising; it was natural that she should avoid so painful a subject. He would dismiss it himself for to-night at any rate.

He took up the poker and stirred the fire, for the weather had changed since morning and a gale howled at the windows. But try as he might he could not force his thoughts in any other direction but that of the one compelling question.

During the many years from his early childhood until now, had his stepmother ever talked with him of his father? Never! And yet he had from time to time asked her about him. He could recall a score of occasions when he had put questions, and how meagrely and haltingly she had answered. From whom then had he gained his knowledge of, his pride in, his love for his father's memory? From Wat Miller, the old keeper in Northumberland, who had told him of the straight barrels Sir Malcolm held; from Simon Blackhouse, the boatman; from Ian MacNish, the stalker; from Mrs. Yorke, the old housekeeper who had been his father's nurse.

Malcolm found with a shock that his knowledge of his father was built entirely on these foundations and that during sixteen years Lady Cahusac had hardly mentioned her dead husband. And again the inquisitor within his own brain asked, why? why?

Yet he knew by some instinct that notwithstanding her silence Lady Cahusac had adored her husband, that the whole emotion of her nature had been expended in that love. This might perhaps account for her reserve in his childish days, but with his manhood the story, the circumstances of his father's death had become as much his heritage as his name or the old North-country estate. Madesson's exact words recurred to him with a new meaning: "solve the mystery"? Was there any mystery beyond the fact that the murderer had never been discovered? Suddenly he knew that this was the suspicion which he had been fighting off all the evening. Lady Cahusac's reticence suggested the idea and he shrank from it. He sat a while frowning into the dying fire; when he rose and began to dress, he had come to a decision. He could not postpone the subject, this very night Lady Cahusac must tell him what there was to tell. Before he slept he must be able to shake off the indefinable dread that overshadowed him. Of course, everything would be explained! Why not!

With night the wind had gone round to the north-east, cold nipped the bud of spring and darkness rushed over a wintry city. The rising gusts could be heard in the dining-room, where set in a frame of oak-panelled walls, the table gleamed white and exquisite under a soft moon of electric light.

Lady Cahusac sat almost silent, opposite to her step-son. During the meal she asked him a few questions, to which he replied rather formally. He now realised

for the first time how formal and restricted had been their intercourse in the past. A good deal of his life had been passed under the same roof and yet how little he knew of her. He fingered a spray of lily-of-the-valley and meanwhile marked the change that a year had made in her appearance. She had not yet outlived her reputation of being one of the handsomest women in London, and the moss-green draperies and emeralds she wore enhanced the beauty that remained to her. But she had grown more fragile, painfully fragile, and the look which as a boy had always surprised him was now more pronounced, more settled in her misty eyes — a quick, hunted look, a look singularly at odds with the composure of her manner, though he recognised to-night that her calmness was not composure, but self-repression.

The servants had long before left the room and the evening was growing late; Lady Cahusac had moved to an armchair by the fire, saying with her faint smile:

"Let us remain in this room to-night, Malcolm," and straightway fell into a reverie, while Malcolm watched the firelight flicker in the decanters before him and cast about in his mind as to how he should open the matter that engrossed him.

"Mater, you should take more care of yourself," he said at last, "or, now that I am here, allow me to take care of you."

She gave him an absent look and murmured: "You are very kind, but I need nothing."

Time passed slowly, with now and then a desultory

word or two until eleven struck, then Malcolm rose and rang the bell. When the butler appeared, he dismissed him for the night — he wished for no interruption during his conversation with his stepmother. He must not trouble her, yet he felt that by taking advantage of her mood, he might learn all there was to learn.

After a while he sat down beside her. "Mater," he said, "tell me about my father's death."

She started violently and began to tremble. "To-night?" she repeated with agitation.

"Yes, to-night," he answered very gently. "Surely the time has come for me to know all that you can tell me."

"I wonder! I wonder!" she murmured with a sudden piteousness.

"He was my father," said Malcolm quietly.

"He is nothing to you — a shadow, a name — but to me!" she paused.

"Trust me," he said after a moment, and checked himself.— Trust? Why that word?

"I meant to tell you when you came home, perhaps to-night;" her thin hands were clenched together on her fan. "You must swear to stand by me, Malcolm! It has worn me out, the knowledge and the long struggle. It has worn me out! You see, I have borne it quite alone!"

Malcolm set his teeth. What in Heaven's name was coming? The suspense was growing unendurable.

"Of course, I will stand by you."

His voice seemed to carry conviction to her. "Then you shall hear! You shall know the truth that is killing me!"

Malcolm waited in silence. Her strange emotion had worked him into a tumult of feeling. There must be some meaning in this mood of hers which was so unlike anything he could connect with his past knowledge of her. Then suddenly he became aware that she was pouring out her story.

"We had been married not quite three years when — it happened. That evening we had dined alone and afterwards went to a ball at the Austrian Embassy. The Prince was there," her voice for a moment lost its strained note in the murmur of reminiscences. "Yes, I remember. I wore the cat's-eyes and diamonds that Malcolm had given me."

The young man knew that he was not the Malcolm of her thoughts, and kept silence, for he was aware that each impression must follow in its due order, the vital with the trivial, falling one by one into its due place in the mosaic of her memory.

"I was wearing green," she went on. "He noticed it; he liked me to wear green.— I danced a good deal and it was nearly two o'clock when he came for me. He never danced. It was time for us to go; he put me into the carriage. He said he would walk — a dark, windy night, but fine. He shut the door himself and called to the coachman, 'All right.' The last words I ever heard him say, 'All right!'"

The jotted sentences like the strokes of a brush re-

produced the scene touch for touch in the young man's excited imagination.

"I was in my room — writing notes to Lord Hipsden and some others, waiting till he came — till Malcolm came.— I was tired and fell asleep.— It seemed but a few minutes when I woke — the bell downstairs was ringing, ringing. It was very dark, and rain beat and spattered on the windows. They laid him on the bed in his dressing-room.— He was dead!"

Young Malcolm sat rigid, waiting.

"They had laid him on his face — the wound was between the shoulders.— I saw the knife.— All night long the house was lit up like a lantern — like a lantern, and men in heavy boots came and went. There was a crowd outside the railings for I heard cries to make way. A doctor came in. I had never seen him before. He said — I overheard, 'Instantaneous? Oh, quite! Can't have known who struck him!' and then, 'Poor lady! poor lady!'" she shook her head slightly as one might over another's misfortune. "I think they, or he, the doctor, gave me something to make me sleep after they had questioned me. When I woke it was daylight — and I realised that Malcolm was dead."

For a long time she brooded and her tone was lower when she spoke again.

"While I lay there, I heard a boy crying the news in the street in a dreadful voice. Somebody went and drove him away. People came but I would see no

one. Then a detective — I was forced to see him. He talked of clues."

"Who found my father?"

"A bricklayer out of work."

"Ah! what of him?"

"Oh, no! there was no suspicion of him!" Lady Cahusac returned sharply. "It was not he! a poor creature who had only left his wife and children a little while to try to earn a few pence. Oh, no!"

The strange certainty of her manner startled Malcolm.

"How can you — know?" he asked.

"It was not a case of robbery."

"You do not mean — that he killed himself?" Malcolm scarcely knew what he said. Wild surmises were mounting to his brain.

She made no direct answer to this, passing it over as if the idea were nothing in comparison with the truth. Malcolm watching her, dropped his hand heavily on his knee.

"Do you know who murdered him?" he asked.

She flashed an anguished look upon him. "It was not — not a murder."

Malcolm leant back in his chair. Here was the explanation, there could be only one. His stepmother was mad, possessed of some outrageous idea!

"The days passed — they brought his coffin," she resumed after a moment. "It was night — they stepped softly, but I knew! And then I saw him for

the last time.— The house was dark and empty — he was gone. And through the heaviness someone carried me a letter. I read it. 'Will you see me for your husband's sake?' that was all." Her strained whisper grated on his nerves.

"Go on," he said hoarsely.

"From the man who wrote that letter I learned the truth. He told me that your father, my husband, had used his official position to sell national secrets to foreign governments!"

"You believed that!" unconsciously Malcolm gripped the arms of his chair.

"Do you think I believed it readily? It was to this man himself that the secrets had been sold!" she threw out one hand with a gesture curiously unlike herself, and Malcolm divined that with such a gesture the disclosure had first been made to her. She was reacting a moment scarred upon her memory.

"He told you a lie! an impossible lie! Who was that man? Leave me to deal with him!"

She surveyed him, crouching in her chair as if with terror.

"What could you do? Would you let the world know? — He had proofs, letters —"

"How did he account for my father's murder?" said Malcolm sternly.

Lady Cahusac put both her hands to her head. "Ah, there was the proof — the strongest proof of all! Suspicion had been aroused and the people in

power, the Secret Service, I don't know who, but those who could not touch him in any other way, had arranged for his assassination!"

Malcolm's face warned her, she raised her hand. "Don't speak! Hear the end.— The question at the moment was to save your father's reputation — no matter how I did it! That man was the only human being who *knew*. Do you understand? He threatened me, there would be an exposure, a scandal, my husband's name dragged down.— He showed me how easy it would be if I — if only I — would help — that it could all be avoided.— I knew where the papers were kept that he wanted. He swore they had been promised to him. What could I do?"

Malcolm thrust his elbow back upon the table behind him, wrecking glasses and flowers. "What *did* you do?" he said.

"I gave them!" she cried with a nervous defiance, stringing her figure upright. "I had to — for your father's sake."

"Have you anything more to say? Let me hear the end of it — now!"

"I have seen the man from time to time — he has forced me to tell him certain things I heard or could find out — to buy his silence.— Oh, you will never understand!"

Malcolm was on his feet. "Who was he?"

"I cannot tell you. I swore to him."

Malcolm did not seem to heed her reply. "Tell me his name."

"I will not break my oath."

"His name."

"You will never hear it from me. But, listen, Malcolm; be patient. There is something you must hear, something far more important. At the beginning he demanded from me two letters which he had written to your father. I could not find them — I believed your father had destroyed them. But a month ago, I came upon them by the merest chance. They were fixed flat against the back of the secret drawer of the cabinet in the study, caught in the woodwork. No wonder he wanted them back! They — they showed me the truth, how cruelly I had been deceived. That same day I cabled for you. It is you who must deal with those letters. Wait! He heard that I had sent for you, he suspected at once that I had found the letters."

"Where are they?"

"I have them still — I have kept them in spite of his threats."

"Where are they?" Malcolm repeated harshly.

"In the same drawer just where I found them." She fumbled at her bosom and drew out a strange crooked key. "You can take them." Then moved by a renewal of her old terrors, she would have clutched at the key again. "But, stop, what will you do with them? Malcolm, Malcolm!"

But he was gone, taking the key, and had crossed the hall into the library. He had spoken no word of reproach, but his face, the eyes with which he had

looked at her when she made her confession! Yet, what she had done, was done for the sake of the other Malcolm whom she had loved.

What was that noise? Transfixed with apprehension and weakness, she listened. Ah, what was it? A cry — a groan? Drawing herself forward foot by foot, she gained the library door. A horrible sense of helplessness oppressed her. The whole night seemed to be listening and she felt afraid.

For a second she stood supporting herself by the door-lintels and looked in. The electric lights above the cabinet shone brilliantly. The next instant all was darkness. But in that instant, as by a flash of lightning, she had seen!

Malcolm lay on the floor, his fair hair already dabbled in blood, and over him stood a man, his body thrown forward, his hand in the drawer which hung open — a loose coat shrouded his figure and though he turned his head at the rustle of her gown she could not see his face under the wide shadow of his hat.

With the darkness her scream came, breaking the stillness. It was a name.

"De Sarsan!"

The intruder fled, striking at her murderously with the weapon in his hand as he passed her, but the blow missed for she lay her length upon the floor, screaming, screaming.

CHAPTER III

THE AFTERMATH

It has been said that a secret is made for the pleasure of being imparted. But there are some few secrets to which no manner of pleasure can by any means be attached, and such run an excellent chance of being kept.

Thus the secret of all that took place on the stormy April night in Park Lane was still inviolate, although close upon six years old. Lady Cahusac had carried the mystery with her to the grave. No coherent word ever passed her lips, filled to the last with tireless laughter. On the day of which we write there were three men living who very literally shared the secret of that evening between them. Each held a partial knowledge of it, but no one of them knew the whole. Probably de Sarsan's information was the most complete, but even he was ignorant of what had happened after he drew the door quietly after him and walked deliberately away down the pavement. So deliberately indeed that he had stopped under the next lamp-post to light a cigar.

Malcolm himself was the second participator. He guessed that the blow from behind which had felled him as he opened the cabinet drawer had been dealt

by the man who had blackmailed Lady Cahusac, for later when search came to be made the letters had disappeared. It seemed that the thief must have entered by the front door, either by collusion with one of the household or more likely still by means of a skeleton latchkey, for the lower stories of the house were found shuttered and barred and showed no signs of violent entrance anywhere. So far went Malcolm's knowledge. The third individual who shared some acquaintance with the events of the night was Surgeon-Major Detching, home from the Rock on three months' leave, who chanced to stroll past 241 Park Lane at the precise moment when a posse of terrified servants rushed out. Detching attended to Malcolm, while a local doctor placed himself in charge of Lady Cahusac.

So it happened that when Malcolm opened his eyes, he saw a red-brown face with a wiry reddish moustache bending over him.

"What is the matter?" he asked vaguely. Then remembrance overtook him in a furious blast. "My God! I know! The letters!"

Detching laid hold of his wrist. "Keep quiet. More troubles are mended by living than dying," he said, drily.

Malcolm's drawn features did not relax. "The letters were in the drawer of the cabinet — I saw them — then I think I heard a noise behind me — but the letters?"

"There were no letters anywhere visible when I came in. The drawer was open but empty. Here

is the key," said Detching, who disbelieved in the cruel mercy of breaking bad news by degrees.

Malcolm raised himself in strong agitation. "He stole them — the man who struck me!" he whispered. "You don't know what the loss means."

"No, I don't know, but from what I can guess you had better get well to look after the business yourself instead of leaving other people to ferret out more."

"Ah! Then I have been talking —"

"Yes, some."

"And I'm hurt?"

"Yes," replied Detching, "pretty badly, in fact. If you had not moved a little when you heard that noise, I don't suppose your assailant's life-preserver would have missed the vital spot."

Cahusac opened his eyes with an effort. "I am likely to talk? — delirium?"

Detching bent down his hairy red ear, for the wounded man's words were barely audible.

"Probably."

"I don't know who you are, but —" Detching nodded comprehendingly in the pause. "Don't let anyone else hear — stay —" and then the little doctor's patient fainted for the second time.

In this way it came to pass that Red Detching, who was well-known and perhaps equally well-liked over a large portion of the globe, spent his furlough in dragging Malcolm Cahusac back to life.

What confidences Cahusac was betrayed into, first in moments of delirium, and afterwards in the facile

moments of bodily weakness, only Detching ever knew, but he succeeded in sending the young man back to face the world strengthened, matured, and proven, and with one purpose dominating his life. He took up his old position in society, and presently entered the Foreign Office as his father had done before him, but although always on the alert for any hint connected with the past, none reached him. On the contrary, many excellent things fell in his way, and he was placed in positions of responsibility because, as it was made clear to him, his father's son was held worthy. During these six years Cahusac had done nothing whatever towards discovering the identity of the person who had dragged so terrible a trail of disaster across his life. He was always alert and waiting, yet no remotest hint reached him that the unspeakable truth about his unhappy stepmother's surrender of the diplomatic documents was anywhere suspected.

Not that his own intention from the beginning ever wavered. The aim which informed his whole life from the moment he came to his full senses and felt Detching's hand upon his wrist, was to find out the traducer and exact from him a revenge the completeness of which he brooded over and thought out through many a long hour of the day and night. His delay was not the delay of supineness, but the delay of calculation and foresight. The Malcolm Cahusac who took up the burden of life again, four months after the attack in the library, was a man with a fine

balance of character struck even by that sledge-hammer blow of fate. The irresponsible ups and downs of youth, the sweet fling upwards of the scale in some exalted ecstatic moment, or the almost equally sweet drop with enthusiasm or a dim melancholy to weight it, were gone for ever; but the poise that remained was of a rare value in its combined strength and delicacy.

The gap between boyhood and manhood is wide, and some spend many happy years in the transit, but if a man be flung desperately across the gulf, the shock is apt to make or maim him for life. It was hard to tell yet what would be the ultimate result with Cahusac.

To begin with, he comprehended well enough that the old proverb, "Least said, soonest mended," applied most particularly to his own case. He put aside the impatience natural to his years, and took up his career; he entered the Foreign Office, and soon bid fair to rise to his father's eminence at an equally early age.

Cahusac felt the need of attaining a high position; he well understood that to strike strongly one must strike from above. Also he must unravel those intricacies of diplomatic method which it had become the object of his life to master and to use for his own ends.

How far Detching's dry aphorisms and cool high views of life helped to bring out good from the evil it is not necessary to examine, but that they had worked largely towards that development, Cahusac

held as a fundamental article of faith. When Detching happened to be in England, the two spent a good deal of their time together, mostly in silence, which did not in the least interfere with their liking for and increasing knowledge of each other. Curiously enough, since the day they parted as doctor and patient, the subject of Park Lane was rarely mentioned between them. It may have been that Detching had counselled Cahusac's steady line of conduct in laying a sound basis of reputation for himself, while at the same time occupying a place in the very ear of rumour as far as the ultimate object of his life was concerned. It may have been that Detching was waiting for that turn in the road, that first gleam of light in the tunnel when, if Cahusac wanted him, he had only to say so.

This attitude was consistent with the whole of Detching's life. He always described himself as a "passenger." "I know where I individually want to go to," he used to say, "but I am never skipper and never guard; I have no responsibility." But he was a passenger always ready to lend a hand on occasion and capable of lending it with effect.

In observing Cahusac, he recognised that the man was not forgetful, not passive; he was only waiting, holding himself in reserve until the call for action came. Cahusac's silence was the wall behind which lay an entrenched resolve and slowly growing powers.

Detching, stepping out of the Dover train on a Saturday afternoon in winter, caught sight of two

men on the platform, with both of whom he was acquainted in a somewhat intimate sense. Judging from this knowledge, their evidently friendly attitude towards each other surprised him considerably. After a slight hesitation he went towards them.

"Hello, Detching! glad to see you home again." Cahusac turned with a grip of the hand, but Detching noticed that the old shadow dropped back over his face. "Congrats on the D.S.O.; it should have been something better. Ah, I see you know Lanceley."

The third man laughed.

"It is my misfortune that my friends usually know a great deal too much about me," he said with a glance at Detching, whose greeting was not marked by any special warmth; "Detching had more than he cared for to do with me at Alexandria three or four years ago. I let you in for a lot of trouble then, but here I am to the good still, thanks to you, I daresay. I'll tell you what's wrong with Detching, Malcolm; he never was a boy!"

"And you'll always be the same sort of boy," rejoined Detching rather drily.

But on the face of it, this seemed the best compliment that could possibly be paid to the young fellow, who, though handsome, derived his chief fascination from that essential boyishness of aspect and manner, which very rarely survives the age of manhood, and still more rarely in the form of an irresistible trait as in Lanceley's case. To those who have known some such man, it will only be needful to recall to them his

invincible charm, and the quite exorbitant hold he gained upon the affections.

"I do not ask for anything better!"

"Yes — it pays," said Detching indifferently. "Are you going out of town to-day, Cahusac?"

"To Ashmills till Monday with Lanceley. And you?"

"Oh, the old place. See you sometime. Hullo! There's a female clutching my uniform case. Well, I'm off."

Half an hour later, as Cahusac and Lanceley alighted at a little wayside station in Sussex, the latter put a question.

"I'm astonished at your knowing Detching. He keeps pretty close to barracks in his acquaintance."

"My experience is that everyone knows Detching," replied Cahusac in his usual tone.

"He don't seem much in your line of country. How did you come across him?" continued the other.

"By chance. And circumstances have thrown us together more or less since."

"Know him well?"

Cahusac looked at him absently.

"I suppose so," he said.

Lanceley laughed. He covered a variety of emotions with his careless laugh.

"We chaps in the British F.O.
All lie so uncommonly low,

If one says to another,
  Is that man your brother?
The reply's, 'Pon my word, I don't know!

"You're almost ideal, Malcolm!"

Cahusac looked at him, now with a shade of amusement.

"Thanks. I have always been in search of the ideal — not this ideal, perhaps, but it's no matter. Any ideal is better than none."

Which remark was beyond Lanceley altogether.

"What the deuce do you mean?" he asked with a hint of temper.

"Nothing, probably. We were talking of Detching, and then you threw my trade at my head. Where's the connection?" returned Cahusac. The very sight of Detching had roused the old bitter thoughts into quickened energy.

"Hang it all! how do I know? Though I can tell you there was some rumour about Detching the last time he went to Africa. People said he was sent to arrange more than the hospital base for the expedition," he explained rather sulkily. "Your political agent may be anyone nowadays."

The train disappeared round the curve of the line with the usual apparent flick of its tail, as a man stepped swiftly from the waiting-room and approached the two young men, who were standing with their backs towards him. He caught the last words as he came up and permitted himself an unseen sneer at the back of Lanceley's head before he spoke.

"Politics, my dear Wilford," he observed, "are forbidden outside the four-mile radius."

Lanceley appeared almost startled as he turned.

"What in the world are you doing down here, de Sarsan?"

"At this moment I am waiting for an introduction to M. Cahusac, whom I have not had the pleasure to meet before, although by sight all the world knows him." De Sarsan bowed as the necessary words were said. He was a rather swarthy personage, with a well-trimmed dark beard, and quick dark eyes. His dress and aplomb of manner proclaimed him a man of the world, and his slight accent that he had been born on the Belgian side of the French border.

Behind his smiling eyes, he was waiting for the first glance in Cahusac's when his own name should be pronounced. But Cahusac merely bowed coldly in return, upon which de Sarsan decided that he held the other at a disadvantage.

"I begin our acquaintance with a request, monsieur," the Belgian went on. "Your dogcart is waiting; may I beg for a seat as far as Lady Fettering's south lodge?"

"With pleasure, though the dogcart is not mine but Wilford's." Cahusac was pointedly ceremonious, but, as de Sarsan reflected, the English have some prejudices — what would you? He on his side possessed a reputation.

"I walked over to the station this afternoon," explained de Sarsan, "to superintend the sending of a

telegram in cipher. The amiable young woman in charge of the office here is an unconscious wit. My last message became under her manipulation one stupendous joke!"

Cahusac made a suitable reply, while de Sarsan idly noted that the young man had the point of a scar just showing below his hair at the back of the right ear.

"I say, de Sarsan," called out Lanceley as the Belgian got out of the trap, "come over to-morrow. My aunt and Alice will be glad to see you."

"He's a very decent sort," he remarked a little later.

"As you said yourself, Wil, your politician can be anyone nowadays — or anything," replied Cahusac.

CHAPTER IV

"TOUCHING HANDS IN THE MEASURE"

LANCELEY was drunk. Not objectionably so, not even visibly so to the eyes of women. Only rather more boyish, more impulsive, more engagingly handsome, with a fleck of brilliant colour on his cheek and a fine luminance in his blue eyes.

It was Sunday night, and Fetterings was as usual rather more gay than during the week. The drawing-rooms and the great hall were well supplied with guests. Lanceley had been moving about talking to one woman or another until he anchored on a low deep lounge by the side of Lorrie Madesson, whose little court of admirers gradually thinned away as they perceived that she meant to give Lanceley an innings. They knew of course that Wil Lanceley was not altogether a desirable companion in his present condition, but then Lorrie Madesson could take very good care of herself, as she had proved during the five years of her widowhood.

Lanceley, flung at ease, laid his arm along the cushioned cornice behind her shoulders, and bent nearer. The last man of her former entourage had, so to speak, evaporated by this time.

"Lorrie, I love you! I'm mad for you! Why

won't you give me some sort of answer? I tell you this kind of thing drives a man to the devil!"

She looked at him over her shoulder with mocking eyes.

"My dear child, I imagined you were one of those persons who had already arrived — in that sense."

"Look here, what's the good of playing with me? Tell me at once and let me shoot myself, or — Lorrie, I haven't any money, but I've decent connections — and oh, Lord! I could make you so jolly happy — When I remember poor old Madesson too, with his long face —"

"We will not bring 'poor old Madesson' — I don't suppose he was five years older than you are, by the way — into this conversation, if you please."

"Oh, all right. But you know what I mean, don't you? Why, I'd chuck the service —"

"You are not so much of a soldier that I need insist upon that," she put in with a laugh.

"Anyhow, we'd have an awfully good time all the place."

"Yes, I've money enough to carry you on for a little while," she said with the tone of offering ordinary remark.

He laughed, and without much caution as to whether the caress were seen or no, he touched her bare shoulder with his fingers.

"The pot can't call the kettle black! These fellows here tell me you've been plunging since you came down to Fetterings. That's a good joke."

Come, if I play, you play, too, darling. And, by Jove, I love you all the better for your pluck!"

"Thanks. That sounds encouraging. But I happen to know when to stop."

He tried to search her face, but her profile told him nothing, while her beauty worked him into frenzy.

"See here, Lorrie, I swear I'll chuck play if you will only marry me. Darling — oh, hang it! no one is looking at us — darling, darling, darling! I swear to you I mean it, I'm hanged if I won't chuck play forever if you'll marry me. Heavens, if I could tell you what I feel! Lorrie, for mercy's sake give me some sort of hope! I'll chuck play. Come, I swear I will!"

He was bending down now so as to look up into her face. Lady Madesson, though she usually kept her feelings well under control, felt the appeal of his personality.

"You are ready to chuck away a good many things for my sake to-night," she said carelessly, but she smiled down into his eyes.

"I'd chuck away my soul for you — before Heaven I would!" he stammered, aflame with hope. "Lorrie —"

There was a little deft movement on the woman's part, and a sound of jarred strings. Everyone looked round.

"You have dropped my banjo, you stupid boy!" Lady Madesson was saying, and Lanceley found him-

self picking up something, he scarcely knew what, while a bewildered sense that but a moment before he had been alone with her surged through his mazed brain, mixed up with wonder as to where all the people he now saw staring at him had come from.

"Mr. Lanceley is going to sing," announced Lady Madesson.

This struck home to the young man's perceptions and to his mood. He would sing as he had never sung before. He supposed he was drunk, he reflected light-headedly, but then he always sang best when he was drunk. That was one good thing. He would make her know now what it was to be mad for love of a woman as he was for her. He would show all those sneering fools how to love. He would send them mad — mad as he was himself, he had done it before.

The lovely tenor swept through the rooms, wild, passionate, pathetic, pleading, maddening. People drew in from the rooms to hear it.

"It makes me shake all over. I knew he sang, but this —!" whispered a woman at the curtained arch to the man behind her.

"He's very drunk, and that's a fact," replied the man with a low laugh.

In the further drawing-room behind them were two people who kept their places. Both sat silent, and the rushing love-song sounded faint and sweet, more like some faintly-stirring memory than any present reality. Cahusac, his hands clasped behind his

head, listened with his eyes on Alice Lanceley's face.

Her physical likeness to her brother struck him afresh though, for the moment, he chose to linger rather on the differences existing between them. Her head was bent a little, and under the soft brown curls that fringed brow and ear and neck in some sweet old-fashioned style now once more in vogue, her features looked pale and set. The burden of life Wil dropped from his shoulders seemed to have fallen upon hers.

"He's very drunk and that's a fact!" the gibing words floated to them across the quiet room.

She raised her eyes and met Cahusac's. She tried to smile but he could see the tears.

"The world is badly arranged," she spoke below her breath. "The strong can meet misfortune and — and temptation. But the weak and the gentle who are easily influenced should all have been born women. It would have been so much easier."

"Have women no temptations?" Cahusac altered his position to hear her.

She caught the sudden dark look on his face. She had never seen it, at any rate never more than the shadow of it, in all the years she had known him, and she faltered in her reply.

"We are sheltered."

"More or less, perhaps, but when the great moment comes is not a woman the more unprepared? The weaker she is, the more desperate will be the thing she does, when driven into a corner. She may wreck

a world, but what matter? She does not stop to think of that!"

He spoke like a man with a bitter reason for his speech. She knew what everyone else knew of his history, and the world added that he was of a cold and calculating nature. Society regarded him distinctively as a man of the world, engrossed by his ambitions; it credited him with a virile cleverness, and believed his air of indifference to be in some way a sign and guarantee of latent power.

Alice, who had been thrown with him a great deal in her childhood, had never been persuaded of his callousness.

"I always used to think he felt things, and I am sure of it now," she said to herself pityingly. She was very tender-hearted, apt to love those about her; she seemed to have been born with Wilford's share as well as her own of the softer feelings.

"A woman driven hard might do a desperate thing, but it would always be for those she loved — not against them! She could not ruin anyone she loved."

Cahusac's smile perplexed her.

"Most of all she will ruin those she loves if she lacks one supreme quality — staunchness. It is the rarest quality in the world, because it omits self in its calculations," he caught a slight bewilderment on her face. "But I shouldn't croak to you, Alice. The least we older folks can do is to leave you young ones to find out the creases in this poor old world for yourselves."

She shook her head.

"You are not so much older than I am, Malcolm. You were at school with Wil, and as for him I feel quite as old as he. Women are always much older than men, you know," she said with her air of simple wisdom. It was never the matter of her speeches but the manner which told.

"Live for a smile,
And die for a kiss!
Glory to die at your feet for a kiss!"

Wil's passionate voice rang softly through the room. Cahusac was reproaching himself. He had alluded to the past, which up to to-day he had held at arm's length, never touching remotely upon it, although it was the subject which most frequently occupied his mind. His own words uttered in his own voice had the effect of a shock. He looked at his companion with a half consciousness of having betrayed himself.

Alice was sitting with her chin resting on her hand; she was apparently full of some troubling reflection. In an instant his thoughts leaped from himself to her. "Glory to die at your feet for a kiss." It may have been the psychological moment. The common little refrain took upon it a transformed volume of meaning. The felicitous intensity of the rendering, the richness and passion of the voice which gave it a right of way to the world's heart, touched Cahusac

too. With the song vibrating in his ears, he seemed to have gained a new sense of vision. As he looked at Alice a quick glow of interest, of excitement, stirred him.

He was still watching her, noting the little chin, the pensive droop of her red lips, and even the turn of each soft curl upon her neck and brow when she raised her long lashes slowly.

"I do not include you," she began, evidently continuing their former conversation, "I don't include you — you seem older than Wil. I think you are older because you have always been so sad."

Her eyes were large and blue — a light clear blue, the very colour of truth.

Cahusac was silent from sheer astonishment. He sincerely hoped that he did not unconsciously pose before the world as an unhappy man! His face altered.

"I have never been accused of anything so sentimental before," he said with a trace of derision in his tone.

"I — I beg your pardon," she stammered, in surprise. Her little speech had contained much more of sympathy than met the ear; how then had it offended him?

"Who has been telling you such an interesting fable about me?" he asked.

"No one, and — it is not a fable. I have known it for a long time."

"My dear Alice, someone has certainly been imposing upon your kindness of heart. Your pity makes an impostor of me."

"No one ever told me you were sad," she replied timidly, "but I have felt — not when you were a boy, but lately — that something very sad is always in your thoughts."

"If that is the case," he said with a slight smile, "I am afraid you will very often be worried by other people's troubles which may after all, you know, be as imaginary as mine."

She looked distressed.

"I am sorry you are vexed," she said after a pause for consideration. "I will never speak of it again."

Her adherence to her opinion, in spite of his disclaimer, and her instinctive reading of him disturbed him curiously. The cadence of the refrain reached them again, and translated itself into a living meaning. The girl flushed suddenly, while to Cahusac came a vivid and startling consciousness of her nearness.

Alice seemed to stand out in that moment from the crowd of people who had passed him during the last five years as dream figures pass and fade, leaving no trace behind — no colour in the nooks of memory. Self-absorbed in the single purpose of his life, he had gazed, as one who sees dimly, upon those who came and went across his path, futile forms and unreal, far removed from the one point about which the dominant incentive of his life had drawn together and focussed

the whole of active feeling. Practically dead outside that one idea, the unexpected contact of Alice Lanceley's words thrilled him. He awoke, as it were, and saw her.

Clearly defined against a massed background of shadows he saw her — not her physical perfections only, but the fair soul of the girl, young and untried and simple. She was sweet and pure, with quick sympathies,— thank God, there are many such women! — but to Cahusac, seen in the light that never was on sea or land, she seemed far, far more.

He did not forecast what was coming, nor how near was the day of action and storm and broken sunshine; but always in looking back Alice, with that delicate flush mounting in her cheeks, personified the dawn to him — the dawn of a troubled day, but after all the day of his life.

CHAPTER V.

WILFORD

De Sarsan sat in the smaller smoking-room at Fetterings, and rings of dissolving blue, drawn from a very excellent cigar, curled up in almost rhythmic succession to the ceiling. Everything was going well, very well indeed, in his own particular world. He, who had formerly been a journalist, and, as occasion offered, a politician, was now a politician, and as occasion served, a journalist. He had made of his career a huge personal success. He had fought for his own hand and prospered, prospered and rose until he became the ruler of his particular section of the universe. All this he had become by doing less for his fellows, except in the way of business, than is usual even with the most selfish of mankind.

His newspaper permeated France; he led public opinion to a very large extent. He was regarded as a man who had his eye perpetually open to many interests, individual and national. He had made it a very leading point to expose frauds of various kinds, little frauds whose promoters were not strong enough to turn and rend him. Thus he had shown himself worth bribing by richer and more powerful rascals.

Experience had made him a past master in the art of underhand bluff. His boast that he could make and unmake a Ministry by scientific wirepulling was not altogether a vain one. His sole restraining principle was self-interest, and he took care to make the fact known to those whom it might concern. Therefore, his wealth increased with the rapidity he had every right to expect.

As was natural, such a man could not be without enemies; singular to say, he had no friends. Yet this friendless man was eminently capable of getting others to serve his ends. He enunciated a system of *quid pro quos*. He was quick to see the goals towards which other men were directing their energies; consequently, knowing the ultimate aim of each career, he was able to further or retard its progress as suited his own convenience and designs. To hold his entourage in leash was more than a wise precaution to de Sarsan, it was his recreation. At the present moment he was occupied with a new scheme, one which appealed not at all to his pocket but a good deal to his head, and most of all — and this sensation, from its rarity, had a keen zest about it — to his heart.

He remembered that his first considerable step upwards had been taken by means of a woman. The documents he had procured so infamously from Lady Cahusac had transformed him from a troublesome petitioner into a *persona grata* and gave him a place of consideration with the various Continental Bureaus.

By means of another woman he now proposed to reach the highest scale of the ladder he had long ago set himself to climb.

He was thinking over this pleasant subject when the door opened under an impatient hand, and swung to behind Lanceley, who, with a scowling glance at de Sarsan flung himself on the cushions of a settee and fell to studying the fire in sulky silence.

De Sarsan continued to smoke luxuriously, but his half-closed eyes took in the fact that the handsome, flushed, brooding boy opposite believed himself to be more than usually at odds with the world. It was curious how unanimous Wilford Lanceley's acquaintances were in accepting his boyhood as an established and continuous actuality.

"I say, de Sarsan, if you have a remark to make, don't be delicate about it. I prefer that to knowing you're grinning at me under your moustache!" burst out Lanceley at the end of some minutes.

The Belgian raised his eyebrows, and removed the long ash of his cigar with elaborate care before he spoke.

"My dear young friend, what is it?"

Wilford Lanceley turned his head slightly so as to look fair across at his interlocutor.

"The devil's in it!" he said savagely.

De Sarsan noted the eyes, the blazing, wonderful light-blue eyes. Wilford's beautiful sister possessed just such eyes, although de Sarsan had never seen them blaze yet, but he flattered himself that in the interest-

ing future there were few expressions he should not have the pleasure of admiring in those same eyes.

"But, my dear Wilford, you are not explicit," he objected. "The devil is — so they tell me —" he shrugged his shoulders apologetically, "in most things. Now and again his head pops up into view, and we conventionally pretend to be surprised, even shocked! Pray in what direction has the devil appeared for you at this particular juncture?"

"All along the line!"

"It is so sometimes, but he passes on elsewhere, always he passes on. We are none of us sufficiently important to usurp the whole of his valuable attention."

"Hang it all, man, can't you see I'm not joking?" expostulated the other. The hot fit was almost over, and in the cold he craved support.

"Precisely, so I perceive, and if you had but given me time I was about to offer you any help which it may be in my power to give. I need not repeat, Wilford, that you are one of the very few men whom I have ever desired to regard as a friend."

"Just so," agreed Wilford, who had preserved with his other youthful habits that of accepting all things as his due without a notion of gratitude or return. "Look here, I'm in no end of a tight place. Debts, Jews, the deuce of a position to keep up, and nothing to keep it up on. Just at this moment, too, when —" with a curse he thrust his forehead into his hands and stopped short in his complaint.

Then followed a long pause, no sound but the crackling of the flames about the log on the hearth.

"I can't hang on any longer," broke out the young man again; "and if I have to leave the Service, I must leave the country — you don't know what it all means to me!"

"Ah, I see. It would naturally be easy for you to leave the country," de Sarsan began in a measured tone, "were it not that first it would be necessary to send in your papers. Am I not right?"

"Curse it, yes! I'm awfully dipped in the regiment."

"But I understood that you had a friend —?"

Wilford did not raise his head, and there was an alteration in his voice which might have led one to believe he was half ashamed.

"The fact is," he said, then paused —"is it strictly between ourselves, de Sarsan?"

"But certainly, my dear fellow."

"I have a friend, as you call it, but her resources have been pretty heavily drained. And now the Jews won't come up to the scratch any more!"

"That," remarked de Sarsan, "is awkward for you, and — pardon, for your friend."

Wilford laughed with some embarrassment, his head still in his hands.

"You may as well know it all. Can't you guess who the friend is? I haven't so many! It is Alice, of course."

"Ah. But how is this! She is not yet of age?"

"No, no," irritably; "but she gave me her written promise years ago —"

"Years ago?"

"Yes, when she was sixteen. She backed herself to pay my debts whenever she got her fortune into her own hands. I'd have gone under long ago but for that, you know."

De Sarsan, aware that his companion was not looking at him, nodded his head at each item of information as one does who checks off known facts and is making sure that nothing is omitted. At the end of the last speech he remained silent. Absence of comment here bore but one interpretation to Wilford's mind.

"Surely you, de Sarsan, are not one of the strait-laced lot who would blame me?" he asked bitterly. "I knew well enough what I was doing. Alice is said to be handsome, and she is certain to marry. If she had been one of your plain sort, of course I'd never have touched a penny. As it is, she won't feel the loss. Can't you see that?"

"*I* see perfectly that whoever had the good fortune to appear acceptable in Mademoiselle's eyes could not, for so much as a second, spare a thought to anything beyond her own personal attractions."

Wilford threw himself back. "Exactly. I knew you'd agree with me; any sensible man would."

"Yet there are a large number of persons whose good sense from your point of view would be conspicuously absent," went on the Belgian.

"Lord! that's the least of my bothers!" Wilford laughed in renewed excitement. "The chief trouble of my life at this moment is that I want to get married myself! Then I could provide for Alice as long as she needed it — that's my point."

"I perceive how you regard it, but what aspect would your conduct in relation to your sister's fortune bear in the estimation of other people?" asked de Sarsan incisively.

"I tell you Alice is one of those women who are only happy in sacrificing themselves. She would sell herself for my sake."

"And you would permit her?"

"Faith, I don't see why she shouldn't be happy in her own way! But drop that, de Sarsan, I tell you I could settle everything if only —"

"You could by any means secure a complaisant brother-in-law, eh, my friend?"

Wilford stared. Enveloped as he was in his own emotions, an undercurrent in de Sarsan's words struck him.

"I say, do you mean — yourself, by any chance?" he asked rather slowly.

A slight shadow crossed de Sarsan's face.

"I mean myself," he answered very deliberately. "Have you an objection — by any chance?"

Wilford pulled himself together.

"Lord no, let her please herself! Only, I had some sort of a notion —"

"Yes?"

"You took me by surprise, you know. I imagined your foreign folks would look blue if you, of all men, married an English girl."

"I can endure that for Mademoiselle's *beaux yeux*. But your other notion?"

"You seem to know what a fellow's thinking of, by Jove! I was going to mention that I had a sort of notion that Malcolm Cahusac and Alice might hit it off. He's a bit of an icicle, but that may be on the outside, don't you know. On second thoughts, I've no grounds for saying there is anything between them. Go in and win if you can, you've my good wishes," he scowled again suddenly. "Look here, de Sarsan, here's a bargain for you. If you'll keep Cahusac out of my way, I'm hanged if I don't keep him out of yours."

De Sarsan was at last genuinely astonished, but he only asked for an explanation.

"It's Lorrie Madesson. I tell you here in cool blood, I'd die next week if I could make her my wife to-day! That's how it lies with me."

"More than one man has said as much in my hearing already."

"I know all about that. They said Gridley of ours, and poor Tommy Sorrel, the brewer's son, killed themselves for Lorrie's sake. That's where I grow mad when I look forward. If I failed!— De Sarsan, I tell you frankly I came here to ask you to help me. People say that you can do whatever you set your mind to. You're always calling me your friend; well,

let's see it act now. Lorrie's money would set me on my legs again — not that I care a curse for that — I'd take her without a penny if I could! But as she has the needful, so much the better. Why, man, I'm dying for her. I feel as if my heart would burst sometimes!" He threw himself into his old attitude of despondency, biting at his moustache.

The colour had gone out of his face; it was succeeded by a curious pallor. De Sarsan turned a glance on him, then he considered his whole face and figure more attentively. Wilford looked haggard and drawn, and he had grown very thin of late. Either he had stronger feelings than any de Sarsan had given him credit for, or — a faint gleam of a new and satisfactory idea strayed for a moment over the Belgian's features.

"I promise you my help in return for yours. As long as you stick to your bargain, you will find me stick to mine. Be joyous! When I choose," he sank his voice, "I can almost promise success. So — !"

Wilford sprang to his feet, and wrung the other man's hand.

"God bless you, de Sarsan!" he exclaimed, and walked out of the room. There were tears in his eyes.

"God bless you, de Sarsan!" echoed the Belgian sardonically, "in the name of the devil, my friend! *Parbleu,* yes!"

CHAPTER VI

INNUENDOES

AFTER a moment de Sarsan rose and followed Wilford, whom he found leaning moodily on an outjutting bracket by the fireplace. A little knob of people were gathered at some distance, Lady Fettering apparently trying to persuade Mrs. Westaway and Alice Lanceley to remain longer, while on one side Lady Madesson was talking with her usual animation to Cahusac.

"See Lorrie!" Wilford said to de Sarsan, who joined him. "Look at her now."

"She is always equally charming," remarked the other.

"You don't know her as I do! That is her way with a new man when she wants to annex him. Don't I know it, look and smile, word for word, and trick by trick! Her face showed it when he passed and she told me to stop him!"

"What — Cahusac? She has surely met him before?"

"Yes," Wilford laughed. "But he has avoided her."

"He saw danger ahead?"

"It's a kind of danger most men like to get into when it's so propitious, by Jove! Now she'll keep him hanging on for six months until she is tired of him, and in the meantime I —"

"So!" De Sarsan's moustache did not hide an ironical amusement as, with a fleshy forefinger, he made an imaginary spiral in the air tending downwards. "My poor friend, let us by all means take measures to evade so melancholy a conclusion."

Both men advanced upon the group. Alice turned to meet them with a tremulous smile.

"We are going, Wilford."

"All right, I've no objection," returned the young fellow brusquely, as he passed on to speak to Lady Madesson.

Alice's expression altered.

"Is he not coming also?" she asked of de Sarsan in a lowered voice.

De Sarsan shook his head.

"If he should not go with you, my dear young lady, will you trust him to me? I will do what I can. But he will be difficult to-night. Ah, yes, I can perceive it — very difficult!" he answered gently.

"Perhaps Mr. Cahusac can persuade him," she added. De Sarsan followed her glance with an obvious superciliousness in his own.

"Am I to understand that Mr. Cahusac is also a friend of our dear Wilford's?" he asked. There was a fine mingling of courtesy towards herself and contempt for Cahusac in his manner.

The girl's manifest astonishment at the tone he adopted annoyed him.

"They were at Eton together. Didn't you know?"

"Ah, that explains! Otherwise —"

"Otherwise?" repeated Alice.

"They would not be great friends perhaps. That is all quite simple, Mademoiselle."

"It is time for you to go home, little boy, and be tucked up in your own little cot. Run away! you are detestably cross," Lady Madesson was saying meanwhile, as Wilford stood white and sullen beside her.

"I begin to feel that way myself," put in Cahusac, laughing. "Shall we make a start of it, Wil?"

"All right, go on," and as Cahusac left them Wilford added, "I only want to be rid of that brute, Lorrie. I'm not going while there's any fun on here, I can tell you! I'll stay and look after you."

"Thanks, but you see I've a notion of doing without you," she answered quietly.

"Well, I shall stay all the same — and look after you too — Now!"

"It's rather a pity that private houses are not so well supplied with the comforts of life as saloons," she retorted.

"There's something implied in that speech, I suppose?"

"Yes — we need a chucker-out."

"What do you mean?" he asked furiously.

"I mean that you are too drunk for decent society," she replied.

"I've — I've been as drunk — as you choose to call it to-night — before, and by heaven you seemed to like it, my lady!" The insult in the words was doubled in his glance and smile.

"I'll never forgive you as long as I live!" She faced him with a dusky glow in her cheeks, and her voice took a deep note.

"That also I have heard before," he grinned, "although I will admit the provocation was of a different nature!"

Cahusac returned at this moment.

"Come along; the carriage is waiting."

"Then it needn't wait, nor you either. Go on, I say!"

"All right,— but if I were you I'd take Lady Madesson's advice, as I am doing myself;" he bowed slightly towards her. "Remember, we must catch an early train in the morning."

"See here, Cahusac, there's one thing every man can do, and that's to mind his own business. Keep your advice till it's wanted!" The foolish rudeness sounded very clearly through the hall. People looked round and laughed, while Alice turned to de Sarsan in dismay.

De Sarsan's pantomime of metaphorically placing himself at her disposal caught Cahusac's attention. To his quickened apprehension the gallantry had a real meaning attached to it. De Sarsan slipped his hand through Wilford's arm.

Wilford flung out an angry word.

"Look here, de Sarsan, we've had enough of this fooling. I don't care for interference any more than my seniors." With that he stalked towards the billiard-room door.

De Sarsan tucked in his elbows and spread his fingers, but with the subdued gesture one notices in those of his race who have spent much of their time in England.

"Alas! We poor diplomats must learn to bear defeat and grin as though we liked it. Is it not so, M. Cahusac?"

"I can't say we have been particularly happy in our methods to-night," said Cahusac coldly. "*We* diplomats!" he thought to himself; "the scurrilous scoundrel!"

Lady Madesson at once resumed her conversation with Cahusac, and de Sarsan lingered for a moment beside Mrs. Westaway, for Lady Fettering had fluttered off before this. But the Belgian's attention was fixed on Cahusac rather than on the lady to whom he addressed himself. De Sarsan was partly Celtic, and he shared in some degree the Celtic power of gauging the mental atmosphere of those about him. The young man opposite was listening to Lady Madesson with a half-smiling gravity and punctuating her brilliant talk with a word here and there that lent to it an added point and piquancy. In a flash it came to de Sarsan what the modulated voice would say if its owner shared the knowledge of the part he, de Sarsan, had taken in the events of the March evening in Park

Lane. The fancy burned for a moment so fiercely in the Belgian's brain that he was vaguely afraid of thought-transference. De Sarsan pictured to himself the grave raising of the brows, and the quiet, expressionless, inexorable anger. He became aware that if Cahusac ever knew, there would be room in the world for only one of them. Until quite lately he had forgotten Malcolm Cahusac amongst the tumultuous play of intrigue, scheming and counterplot which composed his own career. De Sarsan felt he had been deceived by the young man's silent resumption of his life, from which he had too hastily assumed a lack of character and energy. Now when chance threw them face to face, he discovered that the younger Malcolm Cahusac was also a man to be counted with.

When Mrs. Westaway, Alice and Cahusac being gone at last, de Sarsan offered his arm ceremoniously to Lady Madesson to conduct her to a seat, she took it with a glance of amusement.

"You are very polite, Monsieur. It gives one a change at Fetterings to be elbowed around like this."

"I have few such pleasures, Madame," he replied with effusion.— "Our friends have after all been obliged to leave their pet lamb among the wolves."

"Lambs are so intolerably silly," she said shortly. She was tiring of de Sarsan.

"His friend, M. Cahusac, is an interesting fellow. I have never before had the pleasure of meeting him."

Lady Madesson murmured something.

"There is a history attached to him, is it not so?

CHAPTER VII

THE *Gaslamp*

A MAN is never himself save when he is alone, and the key in which he then thinks is the tone-note of his mental world. At other times he is less or more than himself — momentarily baser, momentarily nobler, a thing swayed by the mood of contact or of expediency. But alone with his own memory he cannot choose but fall into accord with the prevailing echo of his past.

Malcolm Cahusac, although he had made himself a man of action, was endowed with many of the qualities that go with a strong imagination. At this period he was overwhelmed by a wave of fatalism. For him the butterfly world around emphasised its own sadness. Events working upon the sensitive material of his inner nature had forced back hope and the spring of youth, and left him sick of that ancient view of life which tells us that it is all old, stale, autumnal, overhandled; that the coming and going of the leaf upon the tree, of man upon earth, is only part of a deadly routine without meaning, without purpose, save only the temporary furnishing of a planet. He fancied that he was looking upon the world stripped of its romance, and that he saw it as it was — a winter stubblefield, alone and cold, in some squalid town

suburb. About it blew a raw wind, which blighted and held no promise of spring; and over the rag-polluted waste arose a desolate insistence of dead lips. Was it a mood or a vision of truth? No, merely the cost of an imagination, which is a gift we pay for in agony.

The conversation between Detching and Cahusac, drifting listlessly to and fro, held somewhat of the meaning of what has been written. Detching waited. He saw that the long apparent calm of his companion's life had been disturbed, the fountains of the deep had broken up, and the tide was rising with a terrific force; and he — was "standing by" as usual.

Cahusac broke a long silence by a question.

"Do you happen to know that Mrs. Westaway is living in — Park Lane?"

"In that house?"

"Yes. She has taken it furnished for the season from the Blaines. I have never been there since," he laughed slightly. "You were with me when I left it, and by an odd coincidence you will be with me to-night when I enter its doors again. It is odd, you know, for the past is not dead — as I had lately begun to believe."

"What has happened?"

"Nothing very tangible. But there are rumours — vague hints. I can't tell you where they come from nor how they have arisen. At present perhaps no one would notice or understand them except those who know."

"How have they reached you?"

"I've seen them in the *Gaslamp* principally, which copies from *L'Œil* more or less. It is an unmistakable attack. It touches on my father's death with cynical comments."

"Nothing about Lady Cahusac?" asked Detching.

"No," said Cahusac, sharply. "Thank God, not that."

Detching stared in silence at his boots, which rested on the edge of the mantelshelf.

"There was a small point I have never mentioned to you. It probably has no connection with our affair. You may recollect that on that night I was walking down from the Marble Arch towards Piccadilly? It was very late, and there were not many people about. The single person whom I saw in the near neighbourhood of your house was a man like a foreigner lighting a cigar under the lamp-post next above your home."

"Like a foreigner," repeated Cahusac. "*He* would have been a foreigner."

"Not necessarily. Some of us have our price, too."

"Detching, that is the man!" Cahusac said with conviction. "If you could lay your finger upon him you would break up the most dangerous wasps' nest in London. In diplomatic matters there is always a leakage. Those concerned find it a dangerous service, and are paid on corresponding lines. Now and then a side-wind comes to us and we take action."

"Diplomatic action?" inquired Detching with some dryness.

"When a man is making off with national secrets in his pocket, if you catch him you may find diplomacy come to hand with fairly conclusive methods," answered Cahusac grimly. "A spy is an outlaw and has no remedy. His own people curse him,—and there is no scandal."

"I see. If I can lay my finger on the man I saw that night, you would —?"

Cahusac rose.

"Do you remember the winter we had together in India? We used to tie up a goat for the tiger?"

"And wait for him, eh?"

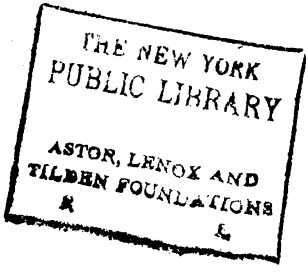
Cahusac nodded and smiled. "Yes. I think there is a tiger on my trail. Keep your eyes open."

Detching fingered his red moustache.

"It would be good shikar," he said.

Cahusac's thoughts swung away on the word to the night-noises of the jungle, and came back with a zest to that indefinable shikar in London.

"Come along," he said aloud. "It's time we were at Mrs. Westaway's."



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CHAPTER VIII

AGAIN

THE music ran on as Malcolm Cahusac passed slowly up the familiar staircase with the crowd. It was some time before he saw Alice Lanceley, who was sitting rather apart. De Sarsan, standing beside her, was talking with a good deal of animation and evidently held the girl an interested listener. Cahusac had leisure to notice a good deal, for the rooms were very full and it took some time to work round to the spot he desired to reach.

"Ah — it is M. Cahusac!" De Sarsan turned quickly; he had seen a subtle change in the girl's face, and the interruption annoyed him profoundly. "You are late, Monsieur, Mademoiselle is already fatigued with saying 'Thank you,' 'You are very kind,' to those whose good wishes she has already received. Is it not so, Miss Lanceley?"

Alice blushed a little.

"I do not feel too tired to say 'Thank you' to Mr. Cahusac — that is, if he means to congratulate me."

"Mademoiselle to-day attains her majority," explained de Sarsan.

"I should remember that, for I had the pleasure of

giving Miss Lanceley my good wishes and — a doll just ten years ago."

Alice laughed.

"And Wil's terrier ate her — don't you remember? I have her head still — nothing else was left of her!"

De Sarsan relished these "Don't you remembers?" very little.

"I hope your gifts are not always so unlucky, Monsieur?' he remarked. "But we have not heard your good wishes for this happy day."

"I shall wait to offer them until M. de Sarsan has gone, Alice," laughed Cahusac. "He has listened to too many and is prepared to be critical."

"M. Cahusac is, I see, an undisguised Imperialist," the Belgian said with a vicious playfulness.

"What do you mean?" said Alice, looking from one to the other.

"Imperialism is your national sin, Mademoiselle, and each individual desires to usurp according to his opportunities. He ousts his neighbour when he can."

"Only in the hope of adequately replacing him," said Cahusac good-humouredly.

"Do they not say 'Imperialism is England'?" Alice put in, using a phrase that had not much meaning in her own ears, but which she hoped might somehow serve to allay the storm.

"Imperialism is England. Exactly!" De Sarsan lost his acquired deliberation of manner and spoke volubly. "A handsome name for a crime. Pardon,

M. Cahusac, for so small a man John Bull has been a wonderful thief!"

"M. de Sarsan and *L'Œil* equally disapprove of us as a nation," Cahusac said, drawing a bow at a venture.

De Sarsan became exceedingly grave.

"You mistake, Monsieur. *L'Œil* is no longer the organ of my party. It has ratted, as you call it over here." He resumed his air of pleasantry. "And it is acknowledged that no enemies are so embittered as those who have once been friends."

"What was it all about?" Alice turned to Cahusac as the Belgian moved away.

"About nothing. The usual cause of disagreements, you know."

"You are laughing — you don't like him?"

"Not especially, perhaps. Probably a prejudice. I hope you do not mind very much?"

"I do — rather," she replied. "He is a friend of Wil's, and I am grateful to him for he has a good influence over Wil, I am sure."

"That is the best thing I ever heard of him. But now to speak of yourself. I have no doll to give you to-day, only my good wishes. What is the best thing I can wish you? Happiness? I will wish you happiness now and always."

"I don't know that coming of age is a matter to be congratulated upon. I don't think it will make me particularly happy," she said with a natural pathos which sat well upon her. "After all, perhaps, it does

not matter. I was taught by my old governess that happiness is not the best thing in the world for one."

"I cannot at this moment recall a better thing, or I would wish you that also."

As he spoke Lady Madesson crossed the room in front of them with Wilford. She was plainly very bored; her brows wore a little frown and she was looking listlessly about her, scarcely listening to Wilford's eager talk. Alice watched them pass, and an unwonted hardness settled round her mouth.

"Happiness and prosperity make people selfish," she said. "Love is better, even if it demands self-sacrifices."

"Then I will wish you love also, but not the love which asks for self-sacrifices. That is not a satisfactory sort, in my opinion."

"But it is the highest. You know, I have often thought —"

"What were you going to say?" He took a seat at her side for her low replies scarcely reached him.

She gave him a half-apprehensive glance.

"I have thought that you knew something of self-sacrifice. You are not like other young men."

"Do you credit me with this also as well as a secret sorrow?" His face was looking down into hers, and she bit her lip at the expression of mocking amusement which grew out upon it. "I wonder if you recollect our talk at Fetterings? — I am very unwilling to upset your theories, but I cannot pretend to

a virtue not my own. I assure you that love has never had anything to do with me, therefore self-sacrifice — in your reading of it — has no connection with me either."

"You hurt me when you laugh at me like that." He puzzled her with these transformations. At one moment kind, his real self; the next mocking, far-off, incomprehensible. She could only retire upon her own simpleness of heart, and working outwards from that point she occasionally sent her answer home. "Why do you sometimes try to pretend to me?"

Cahusac knew her too well to be taken by surprise. She interested him by her curious mingling of simplicity with a natural power of insight. He acknowledged that, in spite of her gifts of heart, she lacked the mental strength to use them to advantage; and yet he knew, had fate allowed, how dearly one man at least could have loved her.

"What do you want me to be?" he asked. He had meant to say something very different, but the question came involuntarily.

"I only want you to be your real self always — with me," she answered. "I do not ask you to — to tell me anything you don't wish to confide to me. Wil says girls are not of much use in that sort of way because they don't understand. Very likely it is so.— I hardly know how I am to make you see what I should like you to do — I daresay it will seem small and silly to you. But I know you are lonely in your life, and I — I am lonely too. Perhaps you will

laugh at me for saying this, but I thought it would help us both to understand one another. I should see when you were sorry, and you would know if I —" she stopped with a quick intake of the breath. "Don't laugh! — what is there in your laugh that hurts me so?"

Her appeal shook him. The suggestion, girlish as it was, touched and attracted him. She was very young for her age, but youth has infinite possibilities. What a woman she might become! — He could not allow himself to dwell upon the thought. That shadow out of the past might yet overtake him — he must ask no woman to share his unstable fortunes. If his stepmother had believed that vile story, would the world be less credulous?

"I am a brute if I have ever hurt you in any way, for you have always been a," he chose out a term with difficulty, "a rest and a restorative to me. You have given me back some part of my faith in goodness. You cannot know how much you have done for me by that alone. But I dare not take your kindness, because it would become indispensable to me. Once I had it, I could never do without it again. In one point you have guessed the truth; I am solitary, and must always remain so. I cannot accept friendship."

Alice sighed rather wistfully. White arms, white garments, and fair face in its soft halo of curls — too good and pure and sweet for any man, he thought, as he looked at her.

"You know best," she said at last. "But I am

glad you told me even a little of your real thoughts. I can be sorry for you — though why we — but you know best."

"I am afraid it is not best — for me at any rate — but it is needful."

"I was right about you in one thing; was I not right too in saying that you sacrifice yourself?"

"If I do," he said more lightly, "my vows are none of my own making. They were made for me perhaps at my baptism."

Wilford came up as he spoke, and with a cool word or two to Cahusac took his sister away.

Cahusac strolled about the rooms, speaking to one and another. He was a little absent, but no one could have guessed that the past and the present were raging furiously in his mind.

After midnight he made his way downstairs. He would not leave the house without seeing again the four walls within which he had spent that March night six years ago. Yet when he reached the closed door he stopped.

While his hand lingered on the handle, he jerked a look back over his shoulder with the instinctive feeling that some eyes were fixed upon him. Detching, who was descending the staircase, nodded down to him and then turned and went up again.

Cahusac opened the door. From behind a screen which stood immediately inside, and similar to one which had stood there in his recollection, came a murmur of voices.

"But you do not understand, Wilford," it was Alice Lanceley's voice; "I promised. I actually signed the paper you brought me."

Wilford laughed discordantly.

"You are a little goose! Do you suppose a man binds himself by his signature? Lord, I hope I may be damned for no worse! It is only a form, my dear girl, it means nothing."

"It is a promise," Alice urged rather hopelessly. "I must keep a promise."

"Oh, I say, look here, de Sarsan, just listen to her! My good child, we were taught to think so when we were young, but it is not a working principle in life. Tell her, de Sarsan."

"Mademoiselle is right," de Sarsan began and stopped.

The words had been spoken quickly as Cahusac appeared, then turned to leave the room again, but he found someone behind him who took him gently by the arm and led him forward.

CHAPTER IX

AN OFFER OF HELP

THE three people already in the room were standing together at the farther end by the window. Lady Madesson, with a mere glance in their direction, guided Cahusac to a couch that stood against the wall almost opposite to the door. Although the others continued to talk in low tones, she was well aware that she and her companion occupied the attention of at least two of the group.

"It looks as if they were bullying your friend, Miss Lanceley," said Lady Madesson.

"I have known her since she was a small child, but I don't flatter myself that she regards me as a special friend," replied Cahusac.

"No? Well, at least I gather you are interested in her," was the pointed rejoinder. "And because she interests *you* I should like to be kind to her, but she does not in the least take to the American element."

"But you like her?"

Lorrie bit her lip furtively, for his tone implied not doubt but certainty.

"You rather expect me to say 'yes' with enthusiasm," she replied, "but that is beyond me.

Though I can see there is much in her to like — that most men would like —"

"You don't like her then," said Cahusac with equal certainty, but evident indifference.

"I don't love her," returned Lady Madesson with an inflection on the verb that made Cahusac smile, it implied so much; "but I would help her and — could help her if only somebody would take the trouble to damp out the starch. As she stands, she has the makings in her of a first-class social martyr. And I have no patience whatever with martyrs."

Wilford Lanceley crossed the room as she spoke, and threw himself into a chair which he brought close to the couch till his knee touched Lady Madesson's skirt. She drew away with a deliberate and cold annoyance.

"Do you imagine yourself in a crowd?" she asked. "Because I assure you there is plenty of room for you elsewhere — outside the door, for example."

"Oh, come, Lorrie, that's a trifle heavy! We're all friends here. Cahusac knows." Wilford laughed with his charming boyish impudence.

"What do you know, Mr. Cahusac?" Lady Madesson turned upon him.

"That I should offer you an apology," Cahusac said with significance.

"Thank you."

"My dear girl, if that's all, I apologise. Let's be proper by all means, but one never knows where to have you; you are pleased one day with precisely the

thing that vexes you on the next! Come, confess, you are cross to-night. And what's the use of it? He knows," raising an eyebrow towards Cahusac, "and I know, and — you know."

"What?" The deep full note of the question almost stopped him.

"You have a beautiful voice, Lorrie," he said; "I love it — and you! — and all the world knows! So that we are only enacting a pretty little comedy, we three — for whose benefit I can't for the life of me conceive. It is a bit of make-believe. But"— the real ardour of his infatuation for her breaking through —"Lorrie, I can't stand it! I can't stand even a pretence that puts you further from me. Even a make-believe of this sort kills me!"

Her fearless eyes met his.

"I almost wish it would kill you at this moment!" she said with a slight lift of the eyelids which seemed to let out a flood of blue, scornful animosity upon him. "Cowards like you exist to ruin lives and reputations. I am not afraid to speak and to call things by their blunter names. It is a comedy and a make-believe on your part. I perfectly understand your motive, and I am not at all afraid of you. You are as crudely familiar as a rude boy — only you have not the excuse of boyhood — because you wish to give Mr. Cahusac the impression that I permit you to be on these terms with me at other times."

Wilford smiled meaningly. He believed he had a strong card left.

"Now why in the name of all that's reasonable should I wish to give Cahusac — Cahusac in particular — such an impression?" he asked.

Lady Madesson did not flinch from the answer as he had expected. She meant to win Cahusac eventually, if she found she really wanted him — of which she was not yet quite sure — but in the meantime she could not submit to the browbeating by Wilford's insinuations.

"Because you are jealous of him," she replied quietly. "And because you fancy this insinuation of yours is precisely the thing to disgust a man of his character. Now at last you know, and I know, and he knows — as you said a few minutes ago."

Wilford's temper got the better of him.

"Yes, Cahusac's knowledge of the case is almost as good as our own. Don't flatter yourself that he knows no more than you have wished him to see! He knows that I am regarded as your accepted suitor. You have had no end of flirtations, but in spite of all your capriciousness, Lorrie, you're mine. London has too many eyes and ears; clever as you are, you have not blinded her! Ask Cahusac himself"— pointing at Malcolm. "Why, you can see how much the man knows by the very face of him! Ha, ha, ha! It's a good joke, upon my word. Ask him, Lorrie, and see what answer you will get if you put him on his honour. Good night, beloved! You want to get rid of me for the moment, but *on revient toujours* —" with that he rose, bowed, and walked out of the room.

Lorrie paused for a second's scrutiny of de Sarsan and Alice, but they appeared to have some engrossing subject of conversation. Then she turned back to Cahusac. She was looking wonderfully beautiful in her anger — the grand moulding of throat and chin lent power to her expression. There was nothing petty or narrow about this woman with her strong nature; she might sin, perhaps, but she would sin superbly, like those black-haired Roman matrons whose beauty she shared.

"We have come to know each other pretty well," she began, "since we met at Fetterings. I don't in the least mind telling you that you have interested me, as many a clever and original man has interested me before. I scarcely know yet whether you are worth any stronger feeling; but you are resolute and you can be sincere. Besides, it happens that chance has put us on the same side. You don't know what I mean? Well, this. You are fighting a battle — perhaps you don't comprehend how remorseless your enemies are. To-night Wilford Lanceley has shown me that I am in much the same case myself. You must have heard, of course, that he wants me to marry him. The news has been common property for some while past, but he has never until now tried to force me to do so. There is some new influence at work."

"You are taking Wil's folly much too seriously. He is a young ass, but I've known him a long time, and I do not think he could have behaved like this

unless he had been — well, not quite responsible." Cahusac felt the awkwardness of the position far more than the lady.

"He may be rather tipsy, he usually is nowadays," said Lady Madesson, "but that does not account for it. No, he is acting on the advice of someone else. The man who is behind him, who is prompting him, is not my enemy, but is working indirectly through me towards an aim of his own. Women see so much, especially women like myself who are alone, who are at leisure to observe, who have no belongings to plot for, no personal advantage of any kind to work towards or gain. The man I speak of is not my enemy, but he is yours."

"I suppose I am hated much as other men are," Cahusac said unconcernedly — with any other woman the conversation would have seemed to be growing slightly emotional and absurd, yet somehow it was not so with this one —"but I don't know that I have any such special enemy," he ended.

"Oh, why fence with me?" she frowned impatiently at him from under her level brows. "I am in deadly earnest, and so is — de Sarsan."

A flash came into the young man's eyes, but his voice was half amused still.

"De Sarsan? what about him?"

His smile stung her; she had meant to approach his confidence gently, but she believed in his danger and was, perhaps, also not averse from proving the value of her opinions and her warning.

"I have a notion that he may know almost as much about the tragedy of this house as you do!"

The colour was struck from Cahusac's face as if by a blow. His lips kept themselves close in a spasm of recollection. He did not speak.

"Poor boy! you are very human after all," she said pityingly — there was much of motherhood in her. "Listen, you have your reputation to save and I have mine. We can fight better together than apart."

"My reputation to save? I did not know —"

"Then you are blind and your friends too! Have you not seen the article in the *Gaslamp?* It is a scandalous little paper, but everyone reads it. It has lately had some articles 'About Foreign Office Officials, past and present.' They are still dealing with the past; yet to-night there are strange hints which seem to concern you. See! I have brought the cutting for you."

He took it mechanically from her hand. This resurrection of the past — ghosts rising on all sides of him — staggered his senses; he half lost control of his judgment: the question he longed to ask was, Where had she acquired her unaccountable knowledge? And yet to ask would be to admit.

"You want to know where I learned all this, how I found it out? You believed it to be so carefully dead and buried," she went on softly as if meeting his thought. "That is easily answered. I told you that you interested me. It was this very story about your father that gave you interest in my eyes when

I first met you long ago. Since then I have tried to hear all I could about it from one source or another. But it was he, de Sarsan, who put me on the right track. Only a close friend — or an enemy could know so much. I arranged the facts I gathered from various people, I inferred this and that from things I saw and heard and joined it all to my knowledge of you. It was quite simple. And then I recognised the wisdom of the course you have pursued in quietly carrying out your original plan of life, and giving no cause for comment or gossip. People had forgotten your family tragedies, but you must face the fact that someone is making it his business to rake them up now, and it is time you were on your guard — you cannot afford to let this go on."

"I am very grateful," Cahusac said, "for your kindness."

He added no more, though she waited for it.

"Very well," she returned; "think over it, and remember that if I can help you, it is more than probable that you can help me. Come in on Friday evening, if you care to talk further about it."

De Sarsan and Alice were moving, and she rose also. At the same moment the handle of the door turned, and Detching stood in the opening. The Belgian and his companion paused to exchange a few words with the other couple. There was a brightness in de Sarsan's eyes: events which pointed towards success had excited him beyond his wont. He felt strong enough to try a fall with fortune.

"You will remember this house, Monsieur?" he said, addressing Cahusac.

Cahusac smiled, a frozen smile of distant politeness.

"Naturally, I recollect it very well indeed. And you, M. de Sarsan, do you happen to recollect it also?"

De Sarsan's face continued still amiably imperturbable, but Detching saw the fingers of the hand which he held behind his back twitch suddenly.

"I enjoyed the pleasure of Lady Cahusac's acquaintance for some years. Her loss occasioned a gap in her own circle which has never been filled," he replied with an audacious relish for the under-meaning of this speech.

Then he turned with Alice Lanceley on his arm. Detching, who was still in the doorway, drew aside with an apology.

De Sarsan stared at him as he passed, and on the stairs asked his companion if she knew who he was.

"I think he is a friend of Mr. Cahusac's," she answered.

"I've seen him somewhere before," de Sarsan said half to himself.

"Very likely. He and Mr. Cahusac are about together a good deal."

"Ah, ah! that explains it, of course."

But not satisfactorily to the Belgian's mind. He, who never forgot a face, could not succeed in placing this one in its specific niche of memory.

CHAPTER X

IDEALS

THE cutting from the *Gaslamp* consisted of a few venomous sentences embedded in masses of verbiage. M. de Sarsan knew his world, and though *L'Œil* now represented a faction with which he no longer openly identified himself, he still held the controlling strings in his hand. Before the world, he was officially connected with another newspaper. But *L'Œil* continued to offer him a safe outlet for damaging onslaughts on foes — or friends.

The *Gaslamp's* attention had been cleverly directed to the pamphlet — from the point of view obtaining on this side of the Channel, one could not describe *L'Œil* as a newspaper — the moment being opportune, for the substance of its articles just then was being neatly medicated to appeal to the British palate, and the *Gaslamp* was tempted to give translations of the lurid "historiettes," the calumnies, the unsavoury personal items; and, finding that scurrility gained favour in certain quarters, it continued to serve up these vitiated gleanings as a weekly dish. From this period, one is obliged to add — not without shame — that its circulation went up by leaps and bounds.

The point of importance to Cahusac in the articles

given him by Lady Madesson was embodied in a few paragraphs. It was asserted that the flagrant hyprocrisy of certain powers was nowhere more monstrously apparent than in the pretended purity of their diplomatic methods. As an instance of the accuracy of this statement, *L'Œil* implored its countrymen to recall the case of a rising young diplomat, who had, it might at this distance of time be admitted, been the secret friend of a country not his own, and whose untimely murder in the streets of London had for some twenty years remained a mystery, *L'Œil,* however, was now in a position to prove that he had been assassinated. Why had this young man lost his life? Who had most to gain by his removal? It was hardly necessary to answer such a question. Further on there was a reminder that the son of the diplomat had elected to follow his father's profession. At this point the subject was dropped.

Next morning Malcolm Cahusac visited Detching at his chambers and with a word or two of explanation gave him the long slip of paper. Detching unfolded and read it slowly to the end. With each line his face grew harder and more grave.

At length he laid it across his knee and smoked on for some moments, then raised the slip and read parts of it again.

Meanwhile Cahusac sat opposite, stern and brooding.

"I say," Detching said abruptly, breaking silence, "are you in love?"

Cahusac had been wrapt in thought, but the question must have touched his reverie at some point. He looked up, and the loneliness of the man leaped suddenly into his eyes.

"I think I should be if — if it were not for that or the chance of such as that coming up against me at any time." His glance fell on the paper slips. "Who knows how much more mud they will throw?"

"Where did you hear of the business?"

"From Lady Madesson last night."

Detching sat up with a jerk. "She would fight your battle for you; a woman whom a man could adore!"

"Perfectly. A woman whom many men have adored."

Detching seldom used bad language. He considered it to be a waste of energy below the dignity of a reasoning creature, but he said something now that sounded double-shotted.

"There's a queer vein of Puritanism somewhere in the bedrock of your character," he went on cynically. "Don't let it influence you against facts."

Cahusac shook his head.

"You're wrong there, old man. My Puritanism, if I have any, is a thin veneer; and,"— he hesitated —"Lady Madesson happens to know it."

"Ah!" Detching's red-bearded face scowled contemptuously across the fireplace. "And yet?"

"And yet she is not the ideal woman."

"Hang ideals! She has touched you — you ac-

knowledge it. And she's just the woman you want. Besides, it's not to be denied that she is perhaps the most beautiful woman in London too, which is saying a good deal. You're blind, Malcolm; I wish I had half your chance!"

"Yes, I admit she is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. As for my chance, if I have any, you're welcome to it."

"I'd say thanks if it was yours to give, but unluckily it isn't. Seriously speaking, you've a dangerous and difficult game to play, and you'll want money. Besides, she's got a head worth two of ours. I tell you, taking you all round I don't know a fellow who wants a wife worse than you do. Keeping this trouble and worry to yourself will turn you sour if you don't look to it."

"What does it matter?" Cahusac's irritability was new. "Could I ask any woman to bind herself to me with all that behind me?"

"Why not?"

"Come now, would you allow your sister to marry a man whose father had been accused more or less plainly of betraying his country in this foul way? Would you allow her to marry a man whose own career must be definitely checked if not ruined by the reaction of such rumours? If I could take steps, if I could have these papers up for libel, for instance — it might be a different matter. But you know how I stand, you know that I am powerless, that I can prove nothing and may never be able to clear up the

unhappy business, unless chance befriends me, and I can get my hand upon the man — but beyond the fact that it was he who stole the letters I have no clue."

The harshness of Cahusac's voice was new to his friend, who pondered for a minute.

"What you say might apply to the Lanceley girl," he said roughly, "because of her relations, who think they run the British Empire upon lines made from their own family tree. But the other — why not?"

"Why not? Because there sits in Paris to-night a man who is wrecking me with pen and paper. After the long silence, I have reached a fresh development in the plot. These articles in *L'Œil* emanate from some obscure source in Paris. I must find out that source, and put a stop to the paragraphs — if I can. I cross to-night."

Detching stretched himself.

"All right," he said, "let us go."

"Not you! Why should I drag you over?"

"Because you are a fool and would swamp without me."

Cahusac laughed with some relief. The tension of the earlier part of the conversation was relieved.

"Besides," went on Detching, "I know a man called Huson, who is Paris correspondent to a couple of big English and American dailies. He ought to be able to give us a lead."

Cahusac made no answer for a moment or two. His face was rigid with some disagreeable, baffling thought. Detching saw the quiet eyes lower to fierceness. After

the long waiting, Cahusac looked as if he had found his enemy.

"It is well that he has held himself in reserve," thought Detching, "for now that the time has perhaps come to strike, he has the strength to strike home." Then added aloud, "By the way, how comes Lady Madesson to be mixed up in this?"

"A woman's curiosity, I fancy," replied Cahusac. "She scented a mystery and began to put two and two together; she appears to have made it her business to find out all she could from everyone who would talk about it, and a good many people have been doing that latterly, as you know," he ended with some bitterness.

"And I bet you she has come to some sort of a conclusion! Why, man, speak out, what is it?"

"Yes, you are right, she has an idea," Cahusac smiled rather incredulously. "She says de Sarsan put her further on the track than anybody. To use her own words, 'no person could know so much unless he were a close friend or an enemy.'"

"Quite so. Go on."

"Well, he is not my friend and she insists she has reason to think he is my enemy."

"You have reason to think the same," said Detching, eyeing his companion askance.

"I suppose so. He might have something to do with these attacks."

"More than possible. Go on."

"He has always been suspected of being a secret

agency man. He was in London at that time. He told me himself that he was acquainted with my stepmother — you heard him last evening. In short Lady Madesson believes him to be the originator of those paragraphs."

"Of course! What a woman!" almost groaned Detching. "Ideals? Hang it all, man, what are ideals to a reality like that? Handsome, level-headed and clever, with love enough and money enough —"

"To make the man who wants her egregiously happy. That's true," Cahusac said, impatiently turning off the other's meaning. "Let that rest for the present."

"All the same she may be the woman to save you — in spite of yourself. Now I have a trifling detail to mention to you, which gives me the idea that Lady Madesson has made the most extraordinary guess at something near the truth. Do you recollect my telling you of a foreigner I met when going down Park Lane on that memorable evening? He stood lighting a cigar under a lamp-post. I could not see his face for he wore a soft hat pulled over his eyes, but I saw his right hand, which held the match, very clearly. I noticed that it had a curious malformation of the little finger, the nail was singularly long and half the width of an ordinary nail. If I had not been a doctor, I don't suppose I should have remarked it."

"Well?"

"I saw that nail again at Mrs. Westaway's last

night, and the hand that carried it attracted my eye because it twitched when you inquired if de Sarsan remembered the house."

"Look here, Detching, you don't mean that de Sarsan — Why have you not told me this before?" Cahusac's voice was low and strained and a vein suddenly stood out upon his forehead.

"For the excellent reason that never before have I had the pleasure of meeting de Sarsan."

"Good Heavens! Then the chances are that de Sarsan is the man! At any rate he is probably the only soul alive who knows the whole truth about that last night at Park Lane, for whoever stole the letters must have been the man who was bound to get hold of them for his own sake at any cost — yes, at any cost. So he ventured far."

"Give him rope enough," said Detching after a moment's silence, "and he must inevitably betray his knowledge."

"No, that must never be permitted."

"It would fix his identity."

"Yes, but at what a cost! I am not prepared to pay it. Detching. Lady Cahusac's story must never be known. Well, we must cross to-night. Once I get hold of his agents, I can lay my hand upon him and bring pressure to bear."

Detching looked round as if mentally picking out the articles he meant to take with him on his journey, and asked half abstractedly: —

"De Sarsan has hated you all these years; why

should he just at this time change his tactics of silence?"

A slow flush crept up under Cahusac's skin.

"He wishes to ruin me — that is all."

"Now why! at this particular time — you have not been interfering with his little games, have you?"

"Apparently he thinks so," Cahusac answered shortly.

"In what way? I'm not usually curious, don't you know, but I must have this straight if I am to be of use."

"It will not, I hope, be necessary for you to do anything but introduce me to Huson."

"No, I hope not. But it seems to me we can't be sure we are booking a bee-line passage to the end we're endeavouring to arrive at. And knowledge may be useful — even to me, who only want to look on, I assure you, if the thing goes propitiously."

"If you wish to press the question then, I have reason to believe that de Sarsan has dared to think of Miss Lanceley as a — a wife."

"He is rather oldish for her to be sure. Yet —"

Cahusac said nothing.

Detching ventured to whistle softly. It is not to be supposed that he had gathered no hint of the subject presented to him in so disjointed a manner by Cahusac, but he chose to make it appear so.

"Malcolm," he began, with the air of one trying to face a preposterous notion with some show of tolerance, "you do not mean to tell me that you — you

have for an instant thought of the same lady in the same light?"

"Had it been possible for me to think of anyone in that light, I might have done so; but — I need not repeat myself."

"O Lord!"

Cahusac turned on him hotly.

"What do you mean, Detching?"

"Eh? nothing."

"Alice Lanceley is innocent and sweet and good, we can't say as much for every woman."

"And strong?" questioned Detching. "We can't say that either for every woman."

Cahusac laughed angrily.

"It strikes me that Lady Madesson has made one man appreciate her."

"That's enough, Malcolm! I can't help your being a fool, but I can help your talking about it. One thing at least you will do: you will go to see Lady Madesson before we start?"

"No," obstinately.

"No? Though she may have valuable hints — even information — to give you?"

"I hope we'll be able to do without either."

"No man can ever do as well without a woman's help when that woman happens to be such as Lady Madesson. You're off? Well, we'll meet to-night at Charing Cross."

Cahusac got as far as the door, and stopped.

"I'm going to Park Lane to Mrs. Westaway's," he

said in an odd, defiant voice: "I may never see Alice again — in the same circumstances. I've denied myself a good many things during the course of my life, I'm hanged if I deny myself this one!"

"What in the name of reason are you going to say? — to do?"

"Nothing! That's the irony of the situation."

He was gone, and Detching stood in the centre of the room, still staring at the closed door.

CHAPTER XI

"THE SYMPATHY THAT GROPES"

WHY did John marry Kitty? — John with his strong, single-hearted nature, takes unto himself and adores as the one jewel of earth — for a limited period until his eyes were opened — the simple-minded, soft-hearted girl, who loves him devotedly but not one whit more than she would have loved James or William or Tom, had any one of those very commonplace young men become her husband and been decently kind to her.

Philosophy and social science and the many specialised forms of study which we have brought to bear upon mankind, have, after all these years, taught us nothing reliable about the master passion. We love still according to no rule, after the lines of no theory; reason has no say in the matter, and expediency is out of court. A man loves from the eye, a woman from the heart; but equally by chance, so to speak.

At 241 Park Lane, Cahusac found Mrs. Westaway. She had once been a pretty girl, and was still pleasant to look upon; naturally good-humoured, well-meaning and impulsive, but somewhat warped by contact with the world. She received Cahusac with an air of gloom.

"Oh, my dear boy, you may well ask what is the matter! — Have you heard of Wil's wickedness? We all knew he was frightfully in debt, and it now turns out he has been raising funds on the strength of a promise made him by Alice that as soon as she got her fortune into her own hands she would make it over to him to satisfy his creditors! To complete the mischief, Alice vows she will keep her word; have you ever heard of anything so utterly unprincipled?"

Mrs. Westaway shook out a fold of her soft laces impatiently, and, leaning back among her cushions, looked at Cahusac for sympathy.

"I cannot believe that Wil intended —"

"I'm not speaking of Wil. We all know, delightful boy, as he is! that he would swindle his own grandmother out of her last sixpence — only she happens to be well aware of his little ways. Not at all! I mean Alice."

Cahusac smiled strangely.

"You brought her up, Mrs. Westaway."

"Malcolm, I have known you from a boy, and I said from the beginning that you were at the bottom of this!"

Cahusac stared at her.

"Yes, I said, it is just like some of Malcolm Cahusac's quixotic notions — you may ask Wil if I did not!"

"I assure you I have never exchanged a single word with Alice on the subject, but one may be permitted to respect her point of view."

Mrs. Westaway resumed her seat with some air of relief.

"I am glad to hear you haven't — more glad than I can say! She quoted cases of people who had kept vows made for them when they were babies, kept them to their own hurt. She mentioned no names, and I am sure I don't know why I thought of you," she went on, not noticing the mingling of embarrassment and elation which crossed Cahusac's face.

"But don't you think she is right?" He put the question in his usual indifferent tone.

"Right? Certainly not! Of course one should be truthful and upright, and all the rest of it; but when it comes to flinging away your whole fortune to the Jews and living on your family, because you happen to have been silly enough to make a stupid promise before you knew to what it pledged you — well, then I am of opinion that no one but a fool would do such a thing. It is quite as criminal to sponge upon your relations as to decline to fulfil a ridiculous and illegal arrangement."

A servant opened the door, and Mrs. Westaway added hurriedly: "Here is Alice. I will leave you with her, and for goodness' sake persuade her to be sensible."

Alice came into the room and greeted Cahusac with that air of slight reserve and dignity characteristic of her race and class. It is a trick of manner, perhaps, and may not represent any inborn quality; but it invariably stands its possessor in good stead. Alice's re-

serve was discounted on this occasion by a deep blush when she became aware of the identity of the visitor.

"I did not expect to see you," she said, "at this hour."

"I happen to be my own master just now," Cahusac answered. "I am going to Paris to-night."

"To Paris? How odd! Wil is going, too, with M. de Sarsan."

Cahusac's face altered. She was watching it anxiously.

"I know you don't like M. de Sarsan," she went on rather hurriedly, "but he does influence Wil."

"For good?" Cahusac did not want to ask the question — it was a stupid and priggish one at best, but he was far more disturbed at this meeting with Alice than he could have believed possible.

"I think I can prove it to you. Has not Aunt Ella asked you to try to make me take a sensible view of my obligations as regards my promise to Wil?"

Cahusac flushed hotly and foolishly, as he acknowledged that she had. Alice's smile took on a little turn of sadness which stirred him still more strongly.

"She asks everybody! I wish she would not speak of our affairs so much and so openly. It is very painful."

"I am afraid no apology of mine will mend the matter, but I can say that I did not venture to think of offering you my advice," he replied with the quick huffiness of a man in love.

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Alice was the type of girl who is readily loved. The type of girl, soft-natured and innocent, whom most men fall down and worship, and who with their gentle dignity and stainless lives have been the home treasure for whose sake Englishmen under the name of England, conquered Napoleon. Half the race have their lives brightened and their romances translated from heaven to earth by such as these.

Her eyes of childlike blue grew misty with reproachful tears. Her reserves were only skin-deep. She answered frankly:

"If you had cared to offer your advice and help, I should have been glad and — grateful."

This was an attack at close quarters of a kind to which Cahusac was not accustomed. He stammered in his answer.

"I have found it difficult. Wil avoids me lately."

"You dislike M. de Sarsan," she went on, not noticing his interruption; "but I have had no one else to help or to advise me. He agrees with me that I must make over my money to Wil's creditors."

"Agrees with you?" Cahusac repeated in surprise, while in his mind he wondered what game the man was now playing.

"Yes, did I not do well to trust him? — Besides, I have no one else!"

She rose and crossed the room to the window, for the tears were falling at last. There was a second's pause, and then Cahusac followed her.

He looked on her in silence, shaken throughout his

whole being by the love he bore her — all dreamy hopes and gossamer thoughts as she was! The living appeal! And these appealing girls rarely appeal in vain. Not intellectual, not strong, not capable, but fulfilling at one period of their existence a very ordinary ideal — yet a man's ideal for all that.

Such she was, sweet and helpless and appealing, fair and dear. He looked at the soft coils of hair upon her white neck, rather astonished at himself perhaps, yet thrilled and elated. He knew in his heart even then that there were thoughts and depths of soul that she could never share. Not the rarest girl in the world is she, yet most men prefer her. She is so different from themselves; she owns all the converse qualities. She is restful, trustful, and knows nothing of the mysterious discontents of spirit, the weary ambitions, the unanswerable questions of life. Marriages may not be made in heaven — some courtships are, at any rate.

"You know I would have helped you if I could — if I had known!" he found himself saying almost unconscious of the words, so filled was he with the sense of her presence.

She turned towards him as he spoke.

"You don't know how lonely I am!" There was no artifice in the plaintive assertion. "I have many relations, but they don't understand. They are all against us — against Wil and me. Now, M. de Sarsan has undertaken to manage everything for me. And you —"

This is the sort of thing that generally has but one result. Cahusac knew so much, and was sufficiently himself to recollect it.

"I am sorry to hear that," he said in a firmer tone. "I think you had much better have put your affairs in the hands of one of your family."

Two shining tearful eyes reproached him. It was almost more than a man could bear.

"I am very unhappy," she said. "I don't know what to do. M. de Sarsan has been our only friend — he has been very kind."

Cahusac felt the check of the last sentence. He longed to speak, and to speak out; to tell her he loved her, and, manlike, he longed to show her how mistaken she was in her opinion of de Sarsan. And yet in all fairness he must be silent. Her very weakness held him back. He did not doubt but that she might some day have learnt to love him, but he could not ask her to share the uncertain future ahead, in which it might well be that calumny would triumph against him. If he told her all, he believed that in her unworldliness and pity she would take no count of possible trouble or shame, but gladly link her life with his. Was ever lover in so hard a case, he wondered? The one comfort of the moment was that de Sarsan, with his wiles and covert designs, was also to be away.

"I am boring you with my silly talk," she exclaimed suddenly — he had kept silence for so long. "I am sorry I spoke of myself. And yet, you know what it is to be lonely and unhappy, too."

He met her eyes, and in his she saw a dumb look of pain which she never forgot.

"Do you remember once you offered me your friendship, Alice?" he broke out, "and what I told you then I tell you now once more. I dare not take your friendship, I dare not be your friend while I stand as I do to-day, in face of I cannot tell what reverses."

She suddenly put out both her hands to him. The action was so natural, so wistfully kind, so eloquent of the unuttered cry: "Let me stand by you, let me comfort you," that he could hardly crush back the answer which burned so near his lips.

It was the moment. He was on the path where one loses count of time. As long as there are two upon it they wander, taking no heed of distance. It is only when one is left to return alone that the way grows very dreary and very long.

"A man's fate is stronger than his will and his desires sometimes," he said tenderly. "If he can break free then he is his own master, to do as he pleases. But until that moment he must be bound by his honour."

He had taken both the slender outstretched hands in his own, pressing them hard in his emotion. She drew nearer with a diffident movement.

"I don't understand you — but I am so sorry for you, Malcolm." The red lips quivered, and her very loveliness translated her speech into comfort for Cahusac's ears.

He could not look longer at the sorrow and supplication of her face.

"The future holds all my hopes — my life," he muttered, as if to himself; then seeing the marks of his impulsive grasp upon her white fingers, he suddenly bent his head and kissed them once and again with passion.

He was gone! She remained very still, one hand holding the other for many minutes. Then, blushing deeply to the brows, she kissed the place where his lips had been.

"I care for him very much," she said softly; "I wish I knew what trouble he fears will come to him. But I am sure he cares for me — and he is very unhappy."

CHAPTER XII

THE WALLOW OF FAILURE

On the following day de Sarsan, entirely satisfied with the position of affairs, started for Paris, taking Wilford Lanceley with him. Alice's gratitude was very real and she showed it prettily, but she made no mention of having seen Cahusac or of his intended journey in the same direction. When alone she glowed softly over her interview with Malcolm; he was her lover and she was proud of him, and of the fact that a man so strong and self-contained should have chosen herself from all the world to love.

Cahusac's dislike of de Sarsan troubled her at first, for the Belgian's interest in Wil and his uniform kindness had won upon her, and presently she came to sigh a little over the unlucky prejudice with which he had inspired Cahusac — a prejudice which she hoped in time to be able to overcome by her own influence. Wil liked de Sarsan; he declared himself safe as long as he was in the elder man's company. So for the time being Alice's fears about her brother were at rest. During his absence she hoped some family arrangement would be arrived at whereby he might be provided for, some provision made which would in fact

permit him to continue the old careless extravagant life he had always led.

By means of de Sarsan's aid, and armed with arguments he had put into her mouth, she believed her trustees could be brought to see the force of her wishes. Her instinct had made her aware of de Sarsan's hopes as regarded herself. He wanted to make her his wife, yet he was ready to sacrifice the whole of her fortune to fulfil a point of honour which all those about her called a foolish whim. So strong a proof of her suitor's disinterestedness and nice sense of honour had its due effect upon her mind and her liking for him.

It need scarcely be said that this was precisely the result which de Sarsan had schemed to ensure. The girl had no idea that the honour for which she was battling so blindly had already been discounted by the Belgian, that, in spite of appearances, her fortune was on its way into his hands and not into those of Wil's creditors; that she was in fact about to be made the victim of a clever and heartless swindle. For the truth was that almost the whole of Wilford's debts had been bought in cheaply by de Sarsan's agents, who were instructed to spread abroad the report that Miss Lanceley, not being legally responsible for her brother's liabilities, would refuse to meet them when the time came.

Things being so far in train, de Sarsan departed in good spirits. Success, amply deserved as he felt, still waited upon him.

Spring had been cold and damp in Paris that year.

On the afternoon of their arrival de Sarsan left Wilford at a certain fashionable club where the play was usually high and turned out into the streets.

A bleak wind was blowing up from the Seine as he passed along the broad boulevard. He had intended to walk to his destination, but the discomfort of the elements drove him into a *fiacre,* which he dismissed at the mouth of the narrow street where the tall, dark houses spoke eloquently of old Paris.

He stood still for a second looking up the dreary vista, and crushed his cigar between his fingers. He was a man who delighted in savouring his good fortune; it was a delicious morsel which he rolled perpetually under his tongue. Even in his thoughts de Sarsan just then did not feel vindictive; when one holds the certainty of power this emotion assumes a piquancy which is pleasant.

He passed down the street to a house on the left hand. The entrance, the stair, and the stout concierge, how well he knew them! He mounted slowly, and each step gratified him. In the old days he had absolutely lived here — on sausages and cigarettes! The apartment he sought was at the top, but here Mouchon had lived, and here little Pierette. Yes, yes — he remembered them all. It was a place where the right man could assail almost any reputation by an outlay of a few score francs. And yet the destroyers never fattened.

De Sarsan paused at a door, knocked, and passed in. The room held only some fragments of cheap fur-

niture. The stove had gone out and crackled as the air grew colder. Dust, cigarette ends, papers, and the remains of a meal were perceivable to at least two senses.

De Sarsan's eyes rushed over the unforgotten details. All seemed unaltered, even the window remained dirty and cracked as it used to be. He had been in these sodden depths, washed hither and thither by circumstances; but he had risen from the slime and been carried by the tide of fortune to bask on the bank in the sun of wealth. Another man might have been involuntarily saddened by this contact with the old sordid life. De Sarsan felt nothing but elation. He understood the feelings of those who lived in such rooms, and the sense of having left all that so far behind flattered him.

He flicked a chair with his handkerchief and sat down. As he did so, the door was thrust open and a small man with a dark stiletto beard entered.

"Ah, it is then you?" he said, after a slight pause.

"Yes, it is I, my good Puyfot, come to have a little peep at my old friends."

The man who had entered was perhaps forty years of age. What his face might have been before the pencils of the passions had worked their designs on it, no one could say. He had a laugh between his teeth, but a dumb spirit of hatred sat behind his reckless eyes. His shiny dapperness and gaiety stood in poignant contrast to the seared brow and eyes endowed with the imagery of evil. The man looked what he

was; half a genius, desperate; an epicure in vicious knowledge.

"To visit an old friend — what kindness!" Puyfot took off his coat and hat, and hung them up, then he applied himself to the stove.

De Sarsan watched him, and laughed.

"Ah, Ulpien, ever the same! Bad times and a bold face. You remind me eternally of the pretty girls, and then — the headache."

Puyfot looked up, and his small features were shaken with a little swirl of laughter. It stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The man gave one the idea that his acquaintance with the nauseous side of life was simply illimitable, yet the whole face spoke of a hopeless depth of unhappiness that somehow held its own attraction.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" inquired de Sarsan amiably.

"Is it necessary for you to ask? we know each other," replied Puyfot. "I am here. I have been here ten years. Presently I shall die here." He laughed again; it was the laugh of a moral drunkard, upon whom the liquor will no longer bite.

De Sarsan was amused.

"And afterwards?" he asked.

"Oh, you will know all about that!"

"I know about it?" De Sarsan disposed himself to hear some new jest.

"We shall meet afterwards." Ulpien stood up and faced him.

De Sarsan frowned. In Puyfot's presence he always felt like a man without a cloak to hide his blemishes. The feeling was so strong that he could have struck the sneering eyes blind.

"Yes," went on Puyfot, "we shall undoubtedly meet hereafter. Shall I say where there are plenty of girls perhaps, and certainly some headaches?"

"You are looking older, Ulpien," said the other abruptly.

"Really? That has ceased to affect me."

"Your way of life is all very well until the grey hairs begin to come; then—"

"What of that? I shall never have grey hairs—old age is in my soul!" the words carried a world of tragedy.

De Sarsan crossed his legs. He had not come there to hear Puyfot's stale confidences in his moments of depression.

"I am very well pleased with the manner in which you are carrying out the affair between *L'Œil* and the *Gaslamp*. The thing begins to move," he said with cold approval.

"Ah! let us to business then. Begins to move? Pardon me, your instructions and your money have come to an end."

"So? I am here, however, to offer you more of both."

"I accept them. We are old friends!"

"You must continue to handle our young diplomat in England tenderly. There are other points you can

use." He lowered his voice and spoke rapidly for several minutes. Puyfot, his eyes closed, his nostrils slightly distended, listened intently until the other ceased.

"Keep it going in the papers, my friend, keep it going. Commit yourself to nothing definite, but also spare nothing in allusions, suggestive possibilities, innuendoes, but vague, always vague and leave the world to draw its own inferences, they will be infinitely worse than the worst you could invent. You can do all this — no one better."

Puyfot opened his black eyes.

"How you hate him! If you were as good to your friends as you are merciless to your enemies —"

"What then? I pay my friends well," said de Sarsan brutally.

"You know what I mean. I want money to live on, yes, but I have wanted something else, your influence. I am tired of my part. I can do no more."

De Sarsan was arrested by the man's manner.

"I have not forgotten your affair, Puyfot," he said, "but I have been away from Paris, and it is my personal influence that I must use to forward your wishes. Your tragedy will yet appear, but it is not precisely easy to gain the ear of that great lady who holds the patronage in her hands. Still, now that I am in Paris, I will see what can be done."

He saw hope gleam for a moment through the other's mask of desperation.

"Will you take it with you — my tragedy? 'Astoreth!'" Puyfot sprang up and opened a tin box. "Look, I shall scarcely dare to part with her, my child, my mistress, my beloved!"

De Sarsan's glance at the manuscript was more than dubious, but he had his own aims in view; at this moment he could afford neither to change nor to lose his tool.

"Yes, let me have it, I will make time to enquire about it."

Puyfot swung round upon him.

"Oh, my friend, if you will do this for me! There are years of labour, of love, of starvation, of waking, of passion in that child of my soul! Take it, take it! Oh, if I should live to see it acted — to see 'Astoreth' sweeping forth in a storm of applause!"

De Sarsan jumped up more briskly than was his wont.

"That will do, my friend!" He put a careless finger on the written pages and turned over one and another while Puyfot watched him.

"Well?"

"My dear man, what can I tell of it? My opinion is not in any case worth the having." He raised his eyes, and Puyfot, sensitive as a mother over a sick child, read there an entire aloofness of thought from the subject in hand. De Sarsan, as he turned the pages, had been absorbed altogether in his own affairs. "I fancy, Puyfot, that to-night we may even ask one question. This is it: "What had Lady Cahusac to

do with the affair? And what was the mystery of Park Lane one night in April, six years ago?"

He took a bundle of notes from a pocketbook and laid them on the table.

"*Au revoir,* I shall see you again this evening." The Belgian moved towards the door, opened it, then, glancing over his shoulder, he saw the fixed attitude of the other man. He closed the door — and stayed inside.

Puyfot sank into the chair before the table, and buried his head in his arms. Silence reigned over the despairing scene for minutes. Then Puyfot's voice rose.

"I — I — I! Yes, he thought of nothing else — he forgot even the tragedy! As for me, I shall rot here, die here. I, who had ambitions and genius. *Mon Dieu!* I still have ambition, I have my genius, and nothing else but regrets. I, who possess a hundred times the talents of that brutal politician — why do I work for him? Why not kill him — or myself — or both!" He sobbed. "Fame! She, who stands so far above me! If I could lie one moment on her breast. And then — and then the night, and — who knows — the punishment! But I rave! There is no hope, no hope!"

The door opened under de Sarsan's hand with some noise. Puyfot started to his feet. De Sarsan was half in and half out of the doorway.

"The tragedy —" he said, "I had forgotten it. Can you not bring it with you to-night to Les Cor-

beaux? By the way, Puyfot, have you not told me that you know something of medicine?"

"I have qualified," Puyfot answered gloomily; "I look after some of my poor neighbours. I know also that I carry death here"— he touched himself lightly on the breast. "Hollow, hollow — like the world I live in!"

De Sarsan looked interested.

"So? You know something of cardiac diseases then?"

"But yes — everything — even of the latest discoveries, since I have a personal concern in them."

"Quite so." De Sarsan came in and shut the door. "There will be a young man in my company. He will probably be very drunk; — can you diagnose his case?"

"If I am paid for it," sullenly.

"That follows — naturally. My young friend is near the end, as I think. You will also bring your tragedy?"

"No."

But de Sarsan was growing weary of his retainer's caprices and furies which he was inclined to consider begotten rather of absinthe than disappointed genius.

"As you will," he said, and this time withdrew finally.

Puyfot remained staring at the door. He was a hopeless and unbalanced blend of realist and idealist, a man who spent five hours in dreams to one given to work. He was devoured by a flame of ambition;

he heard the Muses screaming to him in his sleep. Had he been more of an idealist, men might have taken him at the kindly valuation which they extend to genius. Had he been more of a realist he must have been a name in France. As it was, he was typical of a stratum of artistic life, a stratum which has once been described by a cynic as "the wallow of those across whose foreheads their own genius has scrawled 'failure.'"

CHAPTER XIII

LES CORBEAUX

THEY say its doom is sealed, the once historic café celebrated under the Third Empire for the flavour of its ices and the wit of its customers. Red and gold on the outside, white and gilt within. The company which assembled in those rooms or lingered on the well-known *perron* was composed of that brilliant confraternity, the Bohemian Paris of the Pen.

The long central room, set with little round tables, sparkled in glass and silver and snowy napery. Up to the great beam, grotesquely panelled in brilliant colours, rose the laughter and voices of the illustrious throng. For after all, the men who mould the public opinion of a great nation in any manner whatsoever are by that very fact made illustrious.

It was a representative gathering showing, like the side of a cleft mountain, many various strata. There were leader-writers with bald heads and scented beards; lynx-eyed financiers, stout and bland, dotted in corners, ordering the best dinners and swallowing with ears as well as mouths — for the journalist may be a liar but his *chien de metier* takes him prowling abroad early and late; he scents the first breath of rumour, and that to the financier is oftentimes the breath of

life. Here and there were anxious, melancholy-eyed men, gatherers of foreign or domestic news, jackals to the tigers of assured position on the papers.

These journalists of Paris are unique. They spend their lives in endeavouring to infuse the true literary flavour into their sheets. Their public demand so much, yet they groan under the iron hand of the *feuilleton* and the humorous paragraph and article. Their business is to tickle the Parisian palate with something ever piquante, ever new.

Talk was exchanged from table to table, stories flew from lip to lip, occasionally one man dominated the assembly, gathering every hearer to enjoy the raciness, the brilliance, or the licence of his speech.

The voices had now risen to the full blast of the well-dined. Puyfot, who had dreamed of the angels, was there discussing the drama — which he understood — with a third-grade actor who never would understand it. To his right sat Wilford, ghastly pale and already bemuddled, although the evening was young. De Sarsan had handed him over to Puyfot — Puyfot whose pre-eminence in licentious wit made him famous. But Wilford had got beyond the reach of wit of any sort by this time; he sat with bleared eyes, the skin of the lower lids dragged downwards towards the mouth in the drunkard's characteristic grimace. His breathing was rather laboured and attracted the glance of many a contemptuous onlooker, to whom he offered a strenuous illustration of the genus of his people.

"Have you seen Garlis?" asked his neighbour of

de Sarsan. The speaker was a fat twinkling man of middle age.

"No, I have been in London. What is he doing now, my dear friend?"

"He writes, as you are aware, no doubt, much for *L'Œil.*"

De Sarsan interrupted him.

"Indeed?" he asked with raised eyebrows and an air of polite interest.

The fat man drew in his double chin to look at his neighbour humorously.

"But you — you know! The name of the owner of that most admirable paper is no mystery — in Paris," he said.

"I am no longer in any way connected with the press," announced de Sarsan gravely. "You forget my situation. At the present moment any such connection would be against me in England. No, Gorascon, I have detached myself with tears from the idol of my youth."

Puyfot drew his chair a little further forward, and bowed to de Sarsan coldly and ceremoniously.

"You have been in England for a long time?" he asked, smiling somewhat constrainedly under his thin moustache.

De Sarsan met the advance with equal coldness.

"Yes."

Puyfot laughed, a peculiar laugh that had the effect of bringing all heads round again. As has been said, he had a certain reputation for wit.

"Have you by any chance heard of a M. Malcolm Cahusac?"

De Sarsan bowed surprise.

"Certainly. It has been my good fortune to be acquainted with two men of that name."

"Precisely, father and son. There is a little scandal — a little scandal fluttering about with regard to these two men. Is it not so?" Puyfot twiddled a couple of fingers in imitation of flight.

De Sarsan put on a troubled air.

"I have not heard"— he began hesitatingly.

"Then I will refresh your memory, de Sarsan," cried the fat man. "A Sir Malcolm Cahusac died under peculiar circumstances; he was murdered,— stabbed, I believe — several years ago in London."

"An old story!" "Threadbare!" "Bah!" "Puyfot!" The various comments dropped from disappointed lips.

"Old, yes!" cried Puyfot excitedly, "but not threadbare, since it possessed a political lining of a sort that never wears out. There is a sequel which has remained hidden until to-day."

"There can be no scandalous sequel about the present bearer of the name. I must have heard it if there had been," put in de Sarsan.

"M. Cahusac keeps his secrets close prisoners, my friend," retorted Puyfot.

De Sarsan drew back as if disliking the turn the conversation had taken, but the other men urged the narrator to continue.

"Cahusac senior was killed in the streets of London more than twenty years ago. There were said to be political reasons; but of that later. The mystery is this. Cahusac left a pretty wife, a second wife, and also a child by the first wife, a son of his own name. You follow me?"

"Yes, yes!"

"The boy was five at the date of his father's murder, and he was left, naturally, in the guardianship of his stepmother."

"Exactly."

"Some six years ago this M. Cahusac, then 21 years old, and his stepmother were dining together alone in their house in London. The servants had withdrawn. All was well at nine o'clock, or even at ten. The servants heard the sound of conversation for some time, until past midnight, in fact. Then the quiet was broken by screams of laughter. A party of servants rushed upstairs. Madame was in paroxysms of hysterical laughter,—the young man lay bleeding, unconscious, on the floor. He had endeavoured to kill himself, or who knows? The lady had made the attempt to kill him! Why?"

The faces round were all alert with keenness over this mysterious ending.

"Explain! Explain!"

"Ah, that I cannot. Therefore I have applied to M. de Sarsan," Puyfot replied. "Madame laughed and laughed continuously until she died, but she never again spoke one reasonable word. The son — you are

acquainted with the son, you have said?" He turned to de Sarsan.

"I know him well," de Sarsan said with some dignity, "but this, I have never so much as heard it mentioned."

Puyfot laughed meaningly.

"Which in other words is equivalent to the fact that M. Cahusac junior has had some reason for keeping his own counsel. Is it not so?"

"Precisely! But what a scandal! There must be something hidden. What is it, Puyfot? Tell us the conclusion of the story."

Puyfot shrugged his shoulders.

"Who can say? This only I have heard whispered. The father was in the habit of telling — selling — secrets, in point of fact, he was a friend to other nations than his own. He occupied a high position in the government of his country; therefore, it was easy for him to gather valuable information. But alas! he was found out! He died — shall we say? — a martyr!"

The listeners laughed and Garascon, who had been scribbling some notes, looked up.

"His name, my good Puyfot?" he said. "I have forgotten his barbarous name."

Puyfot was standing at his own table and his answer went distinctly down the room to the open door.

"His name, Messieurs? Malcolm Cahusac!"

"I am Malcolm Cahusac. Who asks for me?" the voice was cold and very clear.

There was a rustle and a stir of immense excitement, and all heads craned in one direction. From the door advanced a group of three men, the foremost of whom, tall, spare and pale, looked inquiringly about him upon the assemblage whom a moment before his name had held in silence.

CHAPTER XIV

FACE TO FACE

A COMPLETE stillness had fallen upon the room. Cahusac walked forward. No one could tell how much he had heard, and his face gave no sign. He passed slowly through the room, amidst a hush of vivid and intense expectancy.

Many of those present hoped for some dramatic dénoument on the spot. It was quite possible that Puyfot had told his story in expectation of the Englishman's arrival at the significant moment. There was a look about Cahusac which promised well for a strong, even a tragic, development.

Puyfot had, with the true instinct of the reptile, obliterated himself amongst a group of the smaller fry of journalism. Cahusac's inscrutable eyes ran rapidly over one face and another until they fell upon de Sarsan's. He stopped opposite to him. He said nothing, but the sudden set of his figure and the tightening of the muscles about his jaw were suggestive. The coldness of the man had flashed suddenly into elemental passion, fierce though silent.

De Sarsan was in reality a little thrown off his balance at the totally unexpected entrance of Cahusac on the scene. He allowed this agitation to appear;

it could be explained afterwards in so satisfactory a manner as an outbreak of friendly feeling, when the suggestive story set afloat by Puyfot should have gone out upon the great sea of the daily papers. He stood up, and bowing with deference to Cahusac, he said: "Good evening, Monsieur; I am proud to welcome you to Paris."

Cahusac returned the salute coldly. "It appears that Paris does me the honour to speak of me," he answered with a slight glance round, then turned and moved with his companions to a vacant table.

The hubbub reigned again. De Sarsan began a discussion upon modern British art in his usual brilliant manner. The general talk swung on; the diners commenced to move about and in the slight bustle, Puyfot made opportunity to get Wilford out of the way. This accomplished, de Sarsan felt more at ease. Three men at least were racing off notes for the morrow; he had aimed at publicity and had hit the bull's-eye. In the morning the story of Malcolm Cahusac would be common property in Paris — the day after, of the world.

Cahusac, with Detching and Huson were chatting together, but Detching could not avoid noticing that most of the men present were furtively watching himself and his two friends. He scowled irrepressibly. It was at this instant that his red-bearded face caught Garascon's roving eye.

"*Ma foi!* de Sarsan," he said, "Puyfot spoke of the devil and behold him! But here are devils of both

colours red and black, equally difficult to exorcise in my opinion. Regard the little one, I pray you!"

De Sarsan darted a glance at Detching. Yes, he had seen the man long ago, his keen memory told him as much, but the link which should have fixed the position in the past was still missing. This troubled de Sarsan the more since he rarely forgot. Then his attention passed on to Cahusac, who was smoking a cigarette over a glass of liqueur. The young man's aspect of cold passivity gave him a shock in spite of himself. It is expedient, even at times interesting, to destroy a man's reputation and soil his honour, but when one happens to deal with persons of cold-blooded resolution, the issue of events cannot be forecast with any certainty. Composure under a severe mental strain was emphasised in Cahusac's case by his air of distinction, and this in turn hardened to an appearance of remorselessness which struck de Sarsan unpleasantly, until he reminded himself that Cahusac would presently be discredited in the face of the world, while he himself possessed the doubly valuable position of being a powerful yet an unknown enemy.

People were coming in and going out. The time of new laughter and more piquant stories was just passing, to be succeeded by the still later period of the still more pungent stories and the loudest laughter. Huson had pointed out one and another of the celebrities to his companions, adding characteristic anecdotes.

"A man's name is likely to be handsomely treated

by some of this company!" remarked Detching grimly.

"You are thinking of Cahusac?" Huson shrugged his shoulders. "We shall know more about that to-morrow."

"Monsieur Cahusac, I should like a word with you in private. I may be able to render you a service."

Cahusac looked round in surprise; de Sarsan was leaning on the back of Huson's chair and regarding him with a grave face.

"I am at your disposal," Cahusac replied, and after a few words with Detching, he rose and followed de Sarsan from the room.

Outside it was bitterly cold and a little snow was falling. The Frenchman walked on a few paces in silence before he spoke.

"You heard your name pronounced in there," with a significant gesture over his shoulder.

A sudden premonition struck Cahusac. He foresaw evil.

"May I ask you what was said?"

De Sarsan hesitated.

"Something of Park Lane, and — and — an attempted suicide."

Cahusac steadied his voice with an effort.

"Suicide?" he said. "Who spoke of it?"

"Puyfot, a purveyor of garbage for *L'Œil,* a literary *chiffonier* who lives on the filthy rags he gathers."

"An old acquaintance of yours, Monsieur?" Ca-

husac stated a fact rather than put a question, but in a manner entirely without offence.

De Sarsan replied with some bitterness.

"*Mon Dieu,* yes! for many years when things went less favourably with me than they do now. His address is here." He offered a card to Cahusac.

Cahusac drew up at once upon the pavement, and faced his companion.

"What is your object in this?" he asked. The directness of the look and the words would have discomposed most men, but de Sarsan was ready.

"There are questions between us, Monsieur, which do not bear open discussion. Because I am your rival in one direction, I am not necessarily your enemy in another," he answered with grave dignity. "My motives for action are no doubt as mixed and unworthy as most human motives are: perhaps the chief one which prompted me was the fact that you have already suspected me. Good night."

Cahusac walked away in the opposite direction, feeling like a man half-drunk, helpless, stupefied.

He strode on for a considerable time before he remembered that the quarter of Paris named on the card lay at a distance. The check had the physical effect of rousing him thoroughly. The absorbed misery of the last half hour fell from him; he became alert, keen, resolute, his normal self. There was something still left to be done, something still to hope for. He might be in time to delay the publication of this Puyfot's knowledge.

With a burning impatience he endured the drive in a *fiacre*. The old ramshackle house, deep in its hidden street, was still alive and awake. The *concierge* was voluble, but Cahusac, not listening to more than the first directions, passed on up the stair. He mounted slowly, counting the storeys until he paused at the indicated door. The landing was dark; something scurried across the floor — one could imagine the ancient boarding a lair of vermin — snores issued from an adjoining room, the clink of broken glass echoed oddly from below; windows rattled forlornly in the stormy wind; dominating all, not by its loudness but another quality as of keen suffering, a strange sound like a death-battle for breath grated on Cahusac's ear.

He waited. Inside Puyfot's room the panting was now intermixed with a thin voice which uttered sentences brokenly. It grew louder and more connected. Cahusac knocked, but no answer came. He opened the door and was met by the musty smell of a much lived-in room. He paused, and the words before indistinct now became clear.

In the middle of the floor stood Puyfot, his eyes away from the door. To the unheeding walls he was giving the speech of Astoreth's human lover. There was no goddess and no glory, but the man was lost in the passion of his dream. His voice rang on and on, bearing him with each sentence nearer to exaltation. It was one of his dreams of the angels.

A moment or two later he had fallen gasping against the table, wrestling for breath.

"France, France! will my voice ever reach your ears? No one aids me, none even hear me! They laugh at me but they will not believe that I, Puyfot, have ever written lines such as these!"

Cahusac could not bear the sound of strained sobbing; he stepped forward.

"Pardon me," he began by a happy inspiration; "I have just heard some great lines."

Puyfot looked up, still fighting for breath.

"Look at me!" he cried wildly. "Genius is mine, and those rare gifts which make life worth living to other men. But I — I am dumb; poverty came upon me in my youth and cut out my tongue! I have sinned against myself. Look at me — hopeless, feverish, starving, condemned to vice! Ulpien Puyfot has another reputation than the one he has yearned for — aye, and earned." He stopped, shook back his head like a man after a plunge in water, and staring at Cahusac, spoke more calmly. "What do you wish of me, Monsieur?"

Cahusac knew that the success of his errand depended much on diplomacy, though there was something loathsome to him about the puny black-bearded poet.

"I think you know me, my name is Cahusac, and I have taken the liberty of coming here in the hope of securing your help."

"I am at your service absolutely," returned the other man. But in his heart he felt satisfaction that it was in his power — in his, Puyfot's, the poor, the degraded, the physically weak — to crush this tall Englishman with his manifest strength of body and of mind.

Cahûsac considered, placing his foot abstractedly on a still burning cigarette end, and broke straight into the heart of his subject.

"Some articles have been appearing of late in a paper called *L'Œil* about former and present officials of the British Foreign Office. Some of these cast aspersions on the memory of an honourable man. I understand you are connected with this paper. Can you help me to find out the writer, that I may prove to him the falseness of his information?"

"Bah!" returned Puyfot carelessly, "what of that? After all, Truth is not the titular deity of Paris and frequently, Monsieur, a lie is infinitely more amusing than the truth."

"But a lie that kills —" began Cahusac.

Puyfot went on.

"Why not go direct to the editor? The office is open," he suggested.

Cahusac smiled.

"I am in earnest," he said.

"So?" Puyfot waited, as if expecting more light to be thrown on a difficult subject.

"In fact, I was led to believe that you could tell me who wrote the articles in question."

"I cannot tell you."

"Is that final? I am ready to buy the information."

"You have done me the honour to come unasked to visit me," replied the other. "It is easy to see that I am poor. I prefer to remain so!"

"Understand me, Monsieur," replied Cahusac; "many of the paragraphs are direct and ruinous attacks upon a dead man's honour. You spoke just now of helplessness, of injustice, of ruin; will you not give your help to another in the same straits? I am fully aware that these attacks are prompted by some influential person who has a purpose of his own to serve. Tell me therefore only the name of the man who is behind the man with the pen."

"I cannot tell you," Puyfot repeated, but Cahusac could see he was growing excited under the spur of talking. His eyes were ominously alight. Cahusac took a rapid decision. He said:

"I have learned something, since I came into this room."

"In that case as I can be of no service to you, you will be good enough to relieve me of your presence," sneered Puyfot.

Cahusac pointed to the single table on which lay a sheet of proofs in the print peculiar to *L'Œil*.

"I have long sight. I can read my name there. I am not bribing you, Monsieur; I am paying, and am ready to pay a heavy price."

Puyfot met the appeal with a derisive lip.

"Your honour is doubtless dear to you, Monsieur, but unhappily my honour is engaged elsewhere."

"Surely your honour would lead you to sympathise with a man in my position. These lying statements concern my father, Malcolm Cahusac. I swear to you that you have been deceived. I swear they are false. You have already spread abroad many hints and innuendoes — have you no desire to give the whole matter a fair hearing before it is too late?"

Puyfot shrugged his shoulders and looked curiously at Çahusac, who continued.

"You are destroying my father's reputation, blasting the good name of a dead man? Do you not shrink from that? It counts far less that you are injuring me beyond hope of recovery."

"Monsieur," replied Puyfot in a high voice, "your career is of absolutely no moment to me; and since your father is dead, his reputation can be of absolutely no moment to him!"

Cahusac snatched up the proofs from the table. "I can at least oblige you to cease these slanderous attacks."

Puyfot seemed about to spring at him, but thought better of it. He leaned across the table and his peaked face worked with passion.

"What do you *know* about your father's death?" he asked, then paused. "Shall I tell you?" he snapped his fingers in Cahusac's face. "Nothing! Nothing!"

Cahusac looked down at him. "You are mistaken," he said. "I do know."

"Bah! I repeat it — nothing, nothing! But what

would you say if I told you that I, Ulpien Puyfot, know your father's affair as I know the palm of my own hand."

"You? You are not forty, and he has been dead over twenty years."

"True. Yet when you were a child, I was a youth."

Cahusac was about to speak but Puyfot went on.

"So you will best serve your interests by leaving me in peace. You cannot force me to divulge to you more than I desire. You are helpless, Monsieur Malcolm Cahusac, son of Malcolm Cahusac!"

The malignant blazing black eyes mocked the young man. He took a hasty step forward.

"I could kill you!" he exclaimed.

"Ha-ha-ha! Of what use would that be?" shrieked Puyfot. "In a few hours the papers will be selling your story in the streets! It was I who used your name to-night. I who told your story in detail at *Les Corbeaux* to-night! You comprehend?"

The news struck Malcolm like a blow upon the heart. He knew himself baffled and defeated by Fate. He had appeared at *Les Corbeaux* too late — only a few minutes too late — as once before he had been too late. Had he reached Park Lane one day earlier he must have secured the letters which would have saved him. There was no more to do now. He turned and groped his way down to the street followed by the screams of Puyfot's discordant laughter.

CHAPTER XV

A DREAM DIVORCED

A FORTNIGHT had passed. Cahusac was back in London, baffled, hopeless, embittered more and more every day, half-maddened with his wounds, as the young must always be.

Cahusac heard everything, every wretched variation that made capital either in the way of amusement or gain out of his story.

There are several different modes of taking a reverse of fortune, and most of them consist simply in running away. It may be done gracefully or awkwardly, but escape from the world's ungentle observation is generally felt to be the easiest thing to do in adverse circumstances. Cahusac stayed.

His great intangible foe, the octopus of rumour, assailed him hourly. It was said that he had sent in his resignation to the Foreign Office. That was expected as being the only course left open to him. Rumour springs from guesses; problematical opinion is the head-water of its flow.

But Cahusac had no intention of retreat. He endured the routine of his life, meeting many cold looks and changed faces. As was inevitable, a certain

amount of suspicion made its way between him and some he had counted his friends in official life.

The enforced waiting had begun again, only under infinitely more trying conditions. To do nothing, to know that chance alone could ever make it possible for him to clear his father's honour, was as hard a lot as any man could be called upon to endure. He had gone again and again through the reports and sifted the evidence connected with the murder, but beyond the fact that the knife used was proved to be one stolen from an eating-house near Leicester Square, no light had ever been thrown upon the matter. Puyfot's claim to further knowledge must be taken at its probable worth — the passionate outbreak of an absinthe-drinker. Chance, and chance only, could befriend Cahusac: all his days he must be alert and awake to seize it, although he was pitifully aware chance might never come his way at all.

His dominant desire at this time was for forgetfulness, to escape somewhere away from the ever present pain. He had the longing to eat of the lotus-flower and to forget — forget his whole past and his whole future, to be done with the battle forever, to be able for the first time in many years to feel that things began and ended in the ample gracious present. It was the longing for a mental holiday, such as all strugglers know, a longing the very thought of which sent him back with a rebound into the clash of real life.

This dream was always at his elbow — that somewhere over seas, outside and beyond the turmoil, there

was a peaceful silence and drowsiness where he might steep his tired brain in sleep.

Sometimes he would wish he had himself sinned some large, romantic sin. At least he could have had himself to blame, to curse. Remorse appeared to his mood of the moment easier than the burden he carried. Still, the exigencies of life demanded constant service. Often the social necessity to do this or that drove him to the borders of frenzy, a revulsion all the keener because he could never give voice to his wrath and wretchedness. One essential of his situation was silence. The single safe confidante he could have gained at this period he did not choose to seek. Through all these wild heart-burnings it was to Alice Lanceley that his mind turned longingly. What rest, what comfort could he not find with her, had his fate been happier! He dared not enter for the race which forms a part of every other man's career. He was not only handicapped; it was more than that, he had been penalised by the misfortunes of those who went before him, and that heavily. He was as one born maimed, mutilated; why had they not shut him out in his childhood from the light of the sun whose gladness he must never again enjoy.

Society continued to send cards to Cahusac, but they were rather less numerous than in the old days. So far he had not shown himself anywhere; he would allow the discussions and the gossipings time to blow over a little. Yet on the other hand, although he could permit society to forget him, he must not per-

mit it to drop him. To maintain his social and official position was a part of his plan.

Therefore on a certain night late in May he made up his mind to appear at a reception, where he was sure to meet Alice, whose family took a prominent part in political and diplomatic affairs. Her uncle, the Earl of Fulham, a painstaking and upright person, deserved well of his country on the whole. He had not genius to place at her service, but he gave the entire energies of his manhood, and in a private capacity set his fellows an example of unaffected well-doing. Lord Fulham held the English opinion that a man should be considered innocent until he is proved guilty, and instructed his wife to be careful never to omit Cahusac when she sent out cards.

Now it need hardly be said that the one person whom Cahusac truly desired to meet in all London was Alice Lanceley. He did her the justice to believe that he would find her the same; worldliness had not smirched the fair whiteness of her nature. He owed it to her and to himself to tell her that he had gone down into the battle and met defeat.

Would life be better for him or worse, he wondered, after he had seen her and told her of his failure? He imagined their meeting in a hundred different ways; he comforted himself with illusory conversations, knowing them to be impossible; he pictured her, her attitude, her oval cheek perhaps paling a little, the droop of her red lips; but above all the look, the sad and tender and sympathetic look, she must raise to

his when he told her. The noises of the city filled his ears, but below all they pulsed to the music of her name.

Some such thoughts revolving still in his mind he stood near the head of the great staircase of Fulham House and kept a watch upon the slowly rising stream of heads that moved upwards from the entrance hall.

Backwards and forwards passed the thronging groups, the social rout for whose commendation many live, the circle among whom it is often small pleasure to be included yet much dishonour to be left out. De Sarsan arrived and bowed to him with a marked courtesy, but Wilford, ghastly pale, chattered past with a nod.

It grew late. Alice was not come. He began to wander through the rooms, when in a doorway a hand was timidly laid upon his arm.

It was Alice. She said nothing; merely offered her hand.

Taken at a disadvantage, for once Cahusac spoke from his heart.

"I thought you were not coming. Thank God!"

She flushed prettily, and drew him gently away from the crowd. There was very little self-consciousness about her. She acted as her feelings prompted, without much thought of consequences or of what the world would think about her. To be near those she loved, to show them kindness, were her ruling desires.

"You look so unhappy," she said with a little glance into his face.

"I daresay you have heard?" He had not meant to say this, but for the moment he was as impulsive, as natural as herself.

"Oh, yes, and I have been so sorry! Let us go into the library. We can talk there in peace."

His heart throbbed. He was not thinking of to-morrow but of the present only, while her hand lay on his arm. She knew all the rumours, yet there was no change in her eyes. Pity was there, and surely something that is above and beyond pity.

The sweetness of her sympathy intoxicated him. He plunged up to the neck in dangerous waters. He sat beside her on a couch, and bending to watch her face he said:

"So you have heard the rumours?"

She smiled, she had feared to find him different, feared to meet the old half-derisive Malcolm instead of the man with whom she had parted in Park Lane — the man whose voice echoed love, although his words only bordered upon that theme.

"What does anything like that matter? — You are you just the same!"

That she should forsake in a second the conventional ideas in which she had been educated all her life almost startled him. Most men like to figure as gods in the eyes of the women who love them; at the least they would wish to bear the semblance of honest men. Thus Cahusac, when he slowly realised the full force of her words, felt almost dismayed. It was not because Alice believed in him through good report and

evil report that he found her unchanged: his character apparently gave her no concern. She was the same merely because she liked him. It was the unreasoning liking of a girl, not of a woman, he told himself. He was conscious of a certain shock at the discovery.

"But these reports touch my honour and my father's good name," he said very slowly, as if wishing her to take in a new idea. "That must always matter. You are so innocent that you cannot realise it."

He averted his face that she might not see the agony upon it.

"I am so sorry for you — Malcolm, I pity you so! It seems hard that I can do nothing to help you."

Her voice created a turmoil in him. Her point of view was to his man's mind so inexplicable. Disgrace she treated as a trifle, but his unhappiness and her own inability to comfort him loomed large upon her. But once more he told himself that it was not the mind but the heart — the heart which was speaking through her words.

"Alice, have you heard the story? They are saying — all sorts of things," he said.

"They?" — Alice in her imagination saw them — *they,* the cruel vague enemies of whom he spoke. Their dimness, their unknownness, added to them strange terrors in her simple mind.

"And you can do nothing? I am so sorry for you," she repeated.

There are few things a man of Cahusac's calibre dislikes more than to feel a woman is giving him her pity. He is unconsciously in his own mind something of an idol, and he perhaps prefers a common form of adoration to the highest form of pity. He wanted to set her right with regard to himself; but while he waited to pick his terms, she went on in her sweet and plaintive manner.

"But it doesn't really matter what people say — that is, I do not mind." She hesitated. She was making a weak effort to gain him and the happiness that she felt might even now elude her clinging hands. "I know you — that is enough for me."

The simple appeal wrung him. Her innocence, her very lack of capableness, touched him as nothing else could have done. He had never loved her so much as at that moment when she had proved her incapacity to reach the heights and depths. She could not understand, but she could love, and nature had made her defenceless.

Cahusac's face turned grey. A word, "I love you. Let us go away together from this hated world — these hateful people. Somewhere where you can be mine and be happy!" how he longed to say it, to take her in his arms and to shield her gentle lovingness from all the buffetings of life! Perhaps she read how near her fate trembled to the balance. She made a little movement, and in her April-blue entreating eyes shone love.

He could not trust himself. He sprang to his feet

and walked hurriedly up and down the room; and through his fading dream of what might have been, showed the dolorous vista of his future. He must not say all that he longed to say, but yet he felt some word must pass from him to her, some landmark to be set up in the memories of both.

"Alice," he said, "I can never tell you how grateful I am to you. You have given me new strength. You have given me a wild flower of romance. I can never gather it, but it will always remain my dearest remembrance."

She rose. Her effort had been in vain.

"Why will men give up all their happiness for an idea?" she murmured, but he would not dare to listen. For her sake he must not hear.

"We may meet again, but never in the same way. Alice, whatever you hear of me, whatever may happen, believe in me still a little." He could not choke down this last appeal. "I want you to remember that you have been more to me here to-night in your kindness and your sweetness than you can ever know. Do not look sad! I can never repay you, but I shall like to think that you are happy — I will wait to see your smile when we pass each other by —"

She clasped her hands together.

"Is this good-bye?"

"Yes, dear, it is the real good-bye between you and me," he lingered a moment at her side and was gone.

She sank back upon the couch. She was dry-eyed, hopeless in a pathetic, submissive way. He had de-

cided; she must submit. It was this very quality of soft submissiveness which had won upon Cahusac's strength.

"I cannot understand these things," she said sadly to herself; "I want to be happy — nothing else matters. But I don't know how to tell him so."

CHAPTER XVI

A REVELATION

AFTERNOON: outside the thunderstorm had just ceased — its low mutterings could still be heard in the distance. The drenched streets and gleaming pavements impressed the senses pleasantly with their unwonted freshness. The smell of wet earth and grass greeted Lorrie Madesson as she crossed the broad street into Kensington Gardens.

She was fond of her own company at all times, and of late the taste seemed growing upon her. There was a quiet walk she frequented a good deal in those days, a straight walk on the verge of the Gardens terminating near Kensington Palace. Her past life was very present with her on this evening. Her happy girlhood, her mother's death, and her almost immediate marriage to a man whom she genuinely liked but could never have loved — a marriage which was the outcome of a passionate horror of her new loneliness. She had given devotion and loving service to her mother, a delicate and brilliant woman, of the true American type, and afterwards she was the more ready to devote herself afresh to the clever, morbid man who became her husband.

Later she understood her mistake. With Madesson

the yoke of loving service galled, and she reproached herself always that his death was less lamented than it should have been. But her experience had developed her nobly into a full and rounded life, self-dependent, wise too when she chose to be so, but she had learnt to regard the narrow conventionalities at their true value. She meant to live according to her own theories, and the high tide of life within her bade her live to secure some tangible good and satisfaction for herself. And this independence society resented after its own fashion with innuendo and sneer, but not with neglect. Lady Madesson was too beautiful, and with a popular section too popular to be omitted from its functions.

The keen scents following the rain had awakened these old thoughts of the past, but soon it slipped away into its own place behind her, and the eager pulsing present rose instead.

The figure of Malcolm Cahusac had for some while past come more and more prominently into her foreground. A chance association of ideas led her mind away to Lancelot and Tristram as Tennyson paints them in their equal sin and in their immeasurable differences. Remorseful Lancelot, who never changed, who was loyal even in his guilt; and Tristram, the hunter, debonair and lightly passionate, with his creed of "We love but while we may!"— Tristram, who could not glorify even his sin by constancy.

Malcolm Cahusac was no Tristram; who won his love must keep it. Alice Lanceley was surely too

slight a thing to fill his heart. Lorrie knew him great because of the hidden battle of his life. In his youth he had chosen the harder part, to face trouble, not to leave it behind; to wait with a patient fortitude that seemed almost impossible even to her, a woman. Out of a strong comprehension of all that his quiet gallantry must have cost him, she had been moved to offer him her help. She put him upon his guard, and he had gone out trusting to himself only to find his foe. Proud and self-contained, he asked no aid, nor did he come to her as other men as self-contained might have done, to claim her promise indeed, but also as a cover for pleasant companionship and increased intimacy with a beautiful woman. Adversity had welded his qualities into a rare amalgam, harder indeed and perhaps not so pure, but in her estimation more precious than gold.

The point, of course, to which all her reasonings led her was the inevitable one — he was worth loving. Lorrie Madesson knew her world, and knew therefore how rare such men are. But alas! the outcome of the matter lay not with her, but with him. Was he one of those who look for something beyond unreasoning love — who in fact would have their wives love them with their hearts indeed, but also with their intelligence? The thought troubled her. She knew him well enough by instinct in one way, but very little by intimate association in another. She had little to guide her. The question was vital, but she must wait for the reply.

She had met him constantly and their acquaintance had much advanced since his return from Paris, but he had not referred in any way to the errand which took him there. She knew that he had been worse than unsuccessful, for the story of Park Lane had been revived and amplified and commented upon indefinitely since that time. He suffered in silence and alone. At times she longed to give the aid and companionship he must need, and yet she liked him all the more for the fine reticence that held him solitary.

The trees had ceased to drip, and Lady Madesson, finding a couple of chairs, took one, for her thoughts weighed upon her; she wished to see her way more clearly through the mists of conjecture and feeling.

As it chanced, Cahusac, after hesitating for a moment at the Broad Walk, turned into the same path. To his relief he saw no one along its length, for the rain had driven away the usual loungers. He walked slowly, his eyes upon the ground, his whole figure unstrung. To the most careless passerby he must have suggested a man acquainted with grief.

Lorrie saw him far off, but did not at first recognise the listless hang of his shoulders and his changed bearing. He came nearer, and would have passed without seeing her, but since fate had flung him so near, she was not going to allow him to drift by.

"It is getting late. I rather want someone to see me home, Mr. Cahusac," she said, rising.

Cahusac started. Then, most unwillingly, it must be owned, he raised his hat, and approached her.

"I did not expect to meet you here."

"Pray don't try to lower my poor vanity — I know that perfectly! All the same, I see you are tired; sit down and rest for a moment."

There was nothing for it but to accept her invitation; but once seated he felt glad of the respite from movement, for he was singularly weary. A recollection of their last meeting before he went to Paris oppressed him. He felt he must allude to it, yet shrank from doing so.

"I found out a little in Paris," he began at last. "I daresay you know the *Gaslamp* relies for its information on *L'Œil.*"

Lorrie nodded. "Well?"

"There is nothing more to tell — only that I found a man in a garret crying for the moon!"

"What do you mean?"

"He was a man who has written a play — a wonderful play I really believe, though he said no one appreciated it. I heard him declaim the lover's appeal to Astoreth."

"But —" she stopped. Cahusac provoked and baffled her. He remained silent, but there was an air of exhaustion in his attitude, which disarmed her.

Then Lorrie Madesson talked to him softly, while he leant back and listened with a growing sense of relief from mental pain that soothed him pleasantly.

By and by he found himself looking at her. She was dressed all in white, and her outline shone out against the dark green background of branches. Her

beauty had stirred him before to-day and now she seemed more lovely, and even more attractive than ever. As she talked, she smiled occasionally, and her smile flashed in the shadow.

Yes, he reflected lazily, Detching was right, what a good comrade, what a companion, this woman could be!

Lady Madesson saw the slow revival of his spent strength and afterwards of his interest in herself. She gave him time to recover completely.

"Surely you do not agree with that," he said carelessly, in answer to some laughing talk of hers. "You do not think marriage spoils a young man's career?"

"Very often it does."

"Why?"

"Partly because woman's love — the love of the average woman — is horribly selfish."

"You will forgive my saying that I as a man think so, but I am surprised to hear a woman acknowledge it. Why is it so selfish? A mere man could never come upon the answer to a problem even so common as this one. The old hackneyed phrase is true. Women are a mystery we fail to fathom through all the ages."

"Is that why you are so apt to prefer the shallow women?" she asked rather quickly.

He felt the prick of the question; it roused remembrance.

"I suppose we prefer what we can understand most of," he replied.

"And you do not care to be understood in return? Are men so ineradicably vain that they prefer to be worshipped blindly?"

The subject was encroaching too near to reality. He laughed.

"I suppose we enjoy worship. It is one of our most contemptible weaknesses. But you promised to explain the other problem to me. Men don't interest me. I know so much about them, you see."

Cahusac had thrown off his depression, he felt cheered; his companion always had the power to stimulate him. Besides, he admired her very particularly. He felt the influence of her strong, intensely human and imaginative nature; his mind responded to the worldly-wise and world-loving side of her character. He often caught himself wondering how a woman of her slenderness could be so commanding. Her face, in spite of its full firm lines, might have been the face of a girl but for her eyes. Her eyes held a history. They made manifest her powers, and perhaps her limitations. She was strong also, with the sympathetic strength a man can trust to and lean upon without losing self-respect. And, above all, she understood.

And Alice Lanceley, what had she to pit against this widowed girl-woman's qualities, her knowledge of life, her glowing beauty? Alice had beauty too, and her ideals yet undimmed in their innocence and singleness of thought; the bloom was on the fruit; she compelled a loving pity where the other compelled

adoration. For Lorrie her weakness was in her strength, for Alice her strength lay in her weakness.

Lorrie was sometime before she answered, and even then Cahusac, wrapped in his own thoughts, hardly heeded. The first words he heard were:

"It is the conventional idea which is all wrong. We are very much what the prevailing set of opinions amongst our intimates make us. A girl from the moment she is engaged leads about in public the man who has chosen her. The average woman's instinct is to love selfishly. 'He is mine,' she says and spends her life in proving it before the world. He does good work, let us suppose. The average wife allows it, delights in it, but her thought is: 'My husband is great.'"

"But look at the reverse picture," he argued; "very few men are big-souled enough to endure that their wives should be greater than themselves."

Lady Madesson's eyes gleamed.

"I don't blame them for that!" she said. "Besides it always works out wrong in the end."

"Things go crookedly if a woman is captain; is that what you mean?"

"Yes. No woman who really believes herself greater than her husband can go on loving him."

"Is not that heresy at the present day?"

"I suppose so. But I am not talking of women as they talk of themselves on platforms; I am taking them as I find them in the mass."

"But we are getting away from our subject — the selfishness of love."

"So we are!" She smiled and considered a moment. "The generally received idea as to what constitutes love is wrong. That is half the mischief. Take two instances. A wife who makes her husband send in his papers on the eve of active service is called loving. It is said she loves him too much to let him go into danger; while another who will not hold him back from his duty, who makes no fuss, but who waits and prays and hopes, who cheers and strengthens him with talk of future meeting and promotion and glory — she is considered cold-hearted, to say the least. A selfish affection parades itself, it clings and forbids and weeps. Yet it is magnified by public opinion, which is always in a hurry and judges by the eye only; while it condemns the true love which refuses to indulge itself at so heavy a cost to its beloved."

Cahusac was thinking of Alice again, but with a lenient tenderness. She could love, dear little girl! even if she could not discriminate between the false love and the true. Faulty reasoning, perhaps, but such as serves with most men.

"And what is the result as far as the man is concerned?" he asked presently.

"If he is easy going, it destroys his moral fibre. If he is not — Heaven knows! The common idea of woman's love turns it into a vice, nothing less. How often do you hear women say, 'There are plenty of single men; let them go and be killed!' We have ceased to think, 'I could not love thee, dear, so much,

loved I not honour more.' Women marry men nowadays to enfeeble them, it seems to me."

Cahusac took off his hat and ran his hand over his hair as he answered with a smile:

"And men like it sometimes, you know. It is restful to be let down easily."

Lorrie looked at him.

"You are thinking of somebody in particular, and speaking from his — or rather her — point of view," she said.

Cahusac's guilt appeared in his eyes.

"How could you guess that?"

"Because you yourself are quite otherwise. I should hate you if —"

"Don't hate me," he said lightly; "I am young still, you know. Let me enjoy as much of life as I may!"

The tone fell cold upon her warm mood and checked her.

"Do you wish to live to be old?" she asked suddenly.

"Good heavens, no! What an awful idea!" He was in bitter earnest now.

"Nor I," she said. "I have often thought I should like to die when I am in the full flower of my life, before I fade. Do you remember what Tristram says? — the saddest lines on earth, I think:

> "May God be with thee, sweet, when old and grey,
> And past desire."

You, at that age will still have your work and your career and your ambitions: what shall I have, for example? Only my eyes, my face, my hair, fading, surely fading, while every year a new wave of beauty rises." Her tone held regret but no echo of feebleness asking for pity.

"There remains the beauty of the mind," Cahusac answered with a keen consciousness of the antiquated inanity of the remark.

"The mind!" laughed Lorrie. "And what does a man care for the beauty of a woman's mind? — What will you give for the beauty of the mind?"

"Respect at least."

"Yes, respect and pity, much as the Roman gave respect and pity to his sculptor or his painter slave. The mind! But what is the good of talking about it? We all know that it is most frequently just its own reward, no more, no less."

"But a woman cannot be beautiful without a soul."

"Nor can a woman be soulful in a man's eyes without beauty!" she retorted. "If she is, the quality is called by other names, cant or affectation — any epithet is good enough to give it."

"Well, it seems to me I can account for that. The greatest soul rarely gives a glimpse of itself to the multitude," said Cahusac.

"Is it not a species of immodesty to bare the soul?" she retorted, falling in swiftly as usual with his thought. "Physical beauty is on the outside; the beauty of the soul is sacred to one. You know as

Holmes says "— she went on more lightly,—" we are different persons to each of our friends. The Lady Madesson Monsieur de Sarsan knows is not Wilford's Lady Madesson, nor is Wilford's Lady Madesson the woman you think I am."

" But you — why will you make yourself so different? " The words were out before he was aware.

She ignored his direct meaning, which might have been translated into a reproach.

" Self-screening is a species of soul-modesty," she replied. " Not two women in a generation lay bare their souls, thank Heaven! "

He had always known that she was the incarnation of something — something whose name was hidden from him, but which dwelt behind the laughter and the brilliancy, the endless varying changes of her eyes. As she spoke, some unseen veil between them seemed to drop. His look plunged deep into her real thought for a second. It was a revelation. But she would not suffer more. With a swift movement, she turned her head away.

" Why? " The question, whick sprang rather from the interchanged look than from her last words, meant much to him at the moment.

" The body perishes," she answered, " but the memory never perishes. Who would reveal herself to one unworthy? But between two equal souls who loved equally self-revelation would be the beginning of eternity! — See! How late it is! I must go." She rose hurriedly, and walked away.

CHAPTER XVII

AT HONOUR'S ALTAR

MRS. WESTAWAY was very grateful. She had never specially liked M. de Sarsan, but if by some ingenious arrangement of the Lanceley money-matters, he could save disgrace to the family at large, and relieve them of expense in the minor particular of providing for Wilford's debts and maintenance, why there was every reason to be nice to the man. He had been talking to her for half an hour, and though she could not understand his chain of reasoning, she hoped she had got hold of the main fact.

"I'm sure it is very good of you to take so much trouble on my nephew's behalf," she was saying. "We all consider it most clever of you to have saved anything for him. Will he be able to live decently?"

De Sarsan caressed the points of his moustache. He saw through his hostess's bland civilities, and despised her rather more than he despised most British matrons. But he replied suavely:

"I promise you he will be able to live as he has lived heretofore, with the exercise of a little economy. That is all."

Mrs. Westaway sighed in a manner that betokened relief.

"That is delightful for him, and quite charming of you to be so resourceful," she said. "But I still wish that Alice had been less wrong-headed and obstinate."

"Is it not your family sense of honour? We cannot condemn her," de Sarsan rejoined innocently, but he had the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Westaway colour and wince.

"Slightly exaggerated in her case," corrected the lady.

"Exaggeration is the fault of youth. We all enthuse while we are young," he said tolerantly.

"It is unfortunate that enthusiasm so rarely provides for its disciples."

De Sarsan was silent for a long moment. It was an eloquent silence, and Mrs. Westaway actually squirmed in secret under its reprobation. She felt mean.

"We must mark our sense of her folly," she said, as if in reply to an accusation. "She opposed those who were in a position to judge better than herself. You may call her conduct by any euphemism you please, but the fact remains that she chose to play the heroine at other people's cost."

It was some days after the reception at Lord Fulham's, and de Sarsan had had time since his return from Paris to put Wilford's affairs in order. This proved to be a somewhat expensive matter, but Alice's fortune which was in his hands more than repaid the outlay. Moreover, he felt he might without much risk undertake to finance that young man in the

future, for Puyfot's verdict on his health had been conclusive. "His grave is already dug, he may tumble into it to-day, or to-morrow, who can tell? But probably before the year is out." He had come to Park Lane to-day to learn Miss Lanceley's exact position under the altered aspect of her fortunes.

"I will not ask any indiscreet questions as to what you have decided upon with regard to her future, but I must deal with frankness as regards my own relation to it," he began with a new earnestness of manner. "I have a very sincere feeling of friendship for your nephew, Mrs. Westaway, but I am not so entirely disinterested as you seem to suppose. I have long admired Miss Lanceley, will you pardon my saying that I now admire her more than ever? I am somewhat older than she is, and I have hesitated to express my wishes; but since she is helpless and practically alone in the world, it is the moment to try my fate."

Mrs. Westaway's blonde and pretty countenance took on a deeper tinge. All her insular and class prejudices rose against the Belgian who aspired to ally himself so closely with her family. On the other hand, there was Alice's position. It might be quite as well for her to marry de Sarsan as to become a governess or something dreadful of that kind. He read her thoughts easily in her changing expression.

"I conclude that my niece knows nothing of your feelings?"

"No. And I venture to suggest that no step should be taken," he said meaningly, "until she has

had time to consider my request and make up her mind as to the answer she will give me. Pray, speak to her hopefully of her future; do not allow her to be influenced in her decision by any fears for the uncertainties or difficulties which may lie before her should she choose the destiny to which you and her other relations have — forgive me once more — condemned her. I would have her accept me of her own free will, unbiassed and uninfluenced."

"As you wish, although I think a girl who has already shown herself so blind to common sense should be guided."

De Sarsan smiled, but not agreeably.

"I am ambitious, I fear, Madame. I have a desire that my wife should accept me from absolutely any other point of view than that of common sense."

This independence established him in Mrs. Westaway's respect. She succumbed at once.

"Alice is in the house. Would you like to see her?"

"There is no time more happy than the present for a man in my position," he replied.

While he waited alone he thought over the coming interview. It must be important in its results, and he had little to guide him in the conduct of it. The side of life with which he was familiar would not aid him on this occasion. Alice in her innocence and aloofness, stood outside his experiences. These qualities tantalised and allured, but they also perplexed. Whether she really lived in the cool altitude of Puri-

tanism or in the lower kingdom of bread and butter he did not know. He smiled to himself. Alice was docile and young enough to be moulded, and he looked forward to bringing her to his own reasonable level. For the present, however, he must avoid wounding her susceptibilities; he would handle them delicately. Yet the marriage must not be too long delayed, expediency urged haste.

At that moment she came in. She had just returned from walking, a tall slight figure in grey with a coil of soft golden hair and blue eyes shining. The wind outside had ruffled the plumes in her hat but brought no colour to her cheeks. She looked tired and heavy-hearted. The man's callous feelings grew pitiful at the sight of her.

"Dear Mademoiselle, you are fatigued!" he said with concern.

"One always is at this stage of the season," she answered with a forced smile. "I know something of it; this is my second season."

"You were not at the Fetterings' last night?"

"No. My aunt did not feel inclined to go. Who was there?" It was a question of the barest civility, but it led directly to the first point de Sarsan wished to make.

"I did not stay long. As soon as I found you were not likely to come, I left." He watched her as he spoke and was pleased to see a faint flush light her pallor for a moment. "I saw Lady Madesson, and Mr. Cahusac — of course."

She was paler than ever now.

"I have not met either of them for some time."

"But you have heard? It will be a very good thing for him," he ended as if by an after-thought.

"What will be a good thing for him?" There was no change in the gentle tone, but de Sarsan was far too experienced an observer not to detect the effort the words cost her.

"For the moment I had forgotten Wil's infatuation," he said apologetically. "For him, however, the marriage would be less desirable."

"Would it be desirable for anyone?" she asked coldly.

"Yes, certainly — for Mr. Cahusac. Her money will mean a career to him. To marry without it spells ruin for a man in his position. And I fancy he knows it."

There was a pause. Cahusac's words flashed back upon her with a new meaning. "Whatever you may hear, whatever may happen, believe in me still a little." And he had been thinking of this — this hateful marriage!

"After all, we must not blame him. She is a very beautiful woman," de Sarsan added.

"It saves Wil at least," she said rather faintly.

"I came to talk to you about Wil. He is very penitent and heart-broken. He has ruined you and himself."

Her white brow took on an anxious frown.

"I have tried to do right, but everything has gone

against us. I try and try to puzzle some way out, but life is such a muddle."

"Have you thought of your future plans?" He suppressed a smile. He could not imagine Alice taking a practical course of any kind.

"Yes. I must be a governess or companion. But I don't know how Wil will live on small means."

"I fear he will have to live on no means at all."

The girl clasped her hands tightly. "Don't say that! I will give him all I can earn. I shall want nothing for myself."

A very real tenderness rose in de Sarsan. He shook his head sadly.

"My dear child, you don't know what you are saying. Wil could not live for a week on all that you would earn in a year."

"Then, what am I to do?"

She was so crushed that he ventured to take her hand in his own.

"I can see a way out — if — if only you will consent to it," he said with hesitation.

She raised her tearful eyes.

"I gave Mrs. Westaway to understand that I had been able to save some remnant of your fortune for Wil. I cannot deceive you in the same way. There is nothing left — actually nothing. Wil's health is not good; if it were, I should not dare to make the proposal I have in my mind. As it is, I — we — have no option. Break off his old habits of life, give him poverty, and he will die."

"Yes!" A single word, but de Sarsan felt he had touched the very centre of the question, the dread of the girl's life.

"You would not sacrifice your honour for his sake, but would you sacrifice your pride?"

She started.

"My pride?" she repeated breathlessly. She appeared half afraid to hear him speak again.

"We — you and I — are the only two people in the world who care for him," he resumed. "Will you let me provide for him? He shall live on in the old way —" He ceased; the next point was the scoring one.

She looked at the hand he held; she loathed his touch, yet had not the courage, the coolness, at such a juncture to draw it away. The man's kindness held her imprisoned. Her brain was in a whirl. On one side the relief was so unexpected, on the other a new tension had been created that held hideous possibilities. De Sarsan, watching her, followed her thoughts fairly well. He was prepared for her next words.

"Of course I consent — for his sake. I can't say anything else. But — I can never thank you —" she faltered.

De Sarsan put his left hand over the tremulous fingers he held in his right. His face was red, his bold eyes abashed, as he said in a sibilant whisper:

"I am willing to do all one man may do for another for Wilford, but I have dared to hope —"

"Ah!" she breathed, sick at the fulfilment of her fear.

"I have hardly allowed myself to imagine — Alice, may I hope?" his voice trembled.

"You cannot care for me!" she cried, quivering under his gaze. "I am only a girl, not witty, not interesting at all, not even clever —"

"Yes, I do love you," he answered. "I have adored you always, from the day I saw you first. See, you will make Wil happy, and me also. You are so gentle, so unfit for the rough usage of the world; how could you struggle amongst strangers, alone?"

She shuddered. The thought had been horrible, it had haunted her for weeks. Yet to be with de Sarsan always — to become his wife! She glanced at him. He was middle-aged, and though carefully dressed as ever, with that extra glossiness of apparel and aspect which is so foreign to the English gentleman, his figure betrayed him. She contrasted him with Malcolm. Her pitiful strait mirrored itself in her face.

De Sarsan dropped her hand, and rose with a telling air of respectful sadness.

"I will not urge you, Mademoiselle. I believed that you did not hate me," he paused.

Her love for Wil and a tragic force of terror with which she regarded the cruel unknown world into which she must otherwise be cast, drove her on. A dim thought strayed across her mind at this last moment, it ended her wavering. Malcolm had bidden her good-bye, and de Sarsan unconsciously supplied

the reason when he mentioned the rumoured engagement to Lady Madesson. In her desire to do right, Alice realised she had thrown away not only her fortune, and with it, alas! her chance of happiness. What had she left to hope for, to expect? Lorrie Madesson's estimate of her character was not faulty. In that high-strung mood she almost gloried in her martyrdom. De Sarsan, middle-aged, unromantic, incredibly dapper, beeswaxed at all points, with his worn smile and hateful flash of shining teeth, remained her only refuge!

"I will do as you wish," she said tearfully. "I promise it. But you will let me go now — I must be alone."

CHAPTER XVIII

ANOTHER TIME

LADY MADESSON walked home from the Gardens slowly and soft-footed along the quiet streets to the quiet square where she lived. She was just a little sad, a little glad, more than a little inclined to mock at herself for the feeling of elation which struggled to rise against the warnings of her wiser judgment. She had stirred Cahusac, it was true, more than she had ever stirred him before, crept in behind the shield of his indifference a little further. He had paid her an unwonted homage of eyes and brain, but these things could avail her nothing unless they brought her in the end into vital touch with his love.

She was aware that every time she met him he left her with the sense of her beauty more deeply impressed upon him, but he was one of those men to whom there is but one woman in the world and so far she was not that one. On the other hand, he was beginning to desire her companionship; she could work upon him through his moods, make him gayer or sadder as she pleased. And that was a step. Hope allured her, although she was too clear-sighted to allow it to deceive her. As she grew to understand Cahusac better she realised that she could not judge

him by the standard of the ordinary man. His temperament no less than his life had set him outside the common run.

When she arrived at home, she countermanded her carriage and resolved to spend the evening in facing the situation, which hourly engrossed her more. Never had life been so interesting. She dwelt upon Cahusac, his words and looks, and that swift encounter of glances which had, she knew, been as involuntary on his side as on hers. Yet one good remained; nevermore could they be ignorant of that which lay beneath the ordinary aspect each faced the world with.

She no longer blinded herself as to the nature of her feelings towards him. Their chance meeting in the Gardens set the seal upon all that had gone before. She smiled rather bitterly at herself upon this conclusion. For the third time in her life she undertook loving service, but her attitude towards Cahusac placed this last self-consecration on an entirely different plane, a higher, and for the time a more impersonal one.

She cast about in her mind what she must do for him. That was simple enough in theory; help him to refute the calumnies that had been spread against him. But in practise it looked far more difficult. If she could mark down the enemy, release must follow; he would be free, and — who knows? — happy. How this issue might affect his relations with herself had no part in her thoughts at that time.

Her chief difficulty lay in the fact that she knew

so little of his story; she could only guess at what had taken place in Park Lane, and she despaired of winning any confidence on that point from Cahusac. No, she must trust to herself to discover the originator of the newspaper paragraphs. Cahusac's visit to Paris had ended in failure, that was plain; but then things impossible to a man come easy to a woman.

In the first place she would be forced to renew her acquaintance with Wilford. She shrank from this, but it seemed the straightest road to the object she had in view, since Wilford had been de Sarsan's companion in Paris. She still held strongly to her first opinion that de Sarsan was the man who pulled the wires, if only they could prove the fact of his complicity.

Wilford came at her summons, aglow with expectation. He had never ceased to believe that Lorrie must prefer him. He believed also in his power to fulfil any promise he might make her; if she were beside him to help him, all would then be well.

Her rooms were full when he arrived, which gave him a shock of disappointment. He had deluded himself into the fancy that she was as eager for a meeting as himself.

"I am glad to see you," she smiled in passing.

"Thanks," he replied sullenly with a significant glance round the room.

"Cross?" Her eyes bewildered him. "They will all be gone presently."

"You do mean it?" he whispered anxiously.

"Good Lord, Lorrie, the sight of all these people make me sick!"

She shook her head warningly and left him, but he was more than content to wait and savour the bliss that was coming.

He was in the inner drawing-room alone, staring abstractedly at his finger-nails, when she stood suddenly before him. Wilford did not admire charming simplicity; he liked women when armed at all points for conquest with every art that civilisation could furnish. One of Lady Madesson's strongest claims upon his heart was her masterly manipulation of clothes. The fabrics she preferred were soft and rich, and the fashion of them a dream. She comprehended the bewitchment that lies in lace and filmy accessories. The art which seems to hide and yet reveals was not unknown to her, but she used it delicately with a subtle and sure effect. The results were never obvious, the gratified eye took her in as a whole, radiant, indescribable.

"Is it not time for you to go away?" she asked softly. "Everyone else has gone."

Wilford was smiling fatuously.

"I have always said, Lorrie, that you were the only woman in London who knew how to dress!" he exclaimed with ardour. "The very sight of you and that alluring, flowery gossamer gown is like cool waters to a thirsty soul!" He looked up with his boyish, confident smile.

"When you have quite done admiring my gown,

may I remind you of the time?" But her lips were not inflexible.

He tried to take her hand.

"Dear Lorrie you promised me that I might stay."

"Promised?"

"Well, as good,"— emboldened by her face — "and now that I am here, I'm hanged if I don't find out why you have used me so badly."

Lady Madesson retreated to the mantelshelf.

"If we are going to carry on an old quarrel —" she began, in a chill tone.

Wilford was quiet for a moment, contemplating her from head to foot, then he sprang up, and, kneeling at her feet, he made as if to throw his arms round her.

"Lorrie, why would you not see me? My eyes have ached for the sight of you!"

Lorrie had not been averse at any time from using her beauty to subdue men for her amusement, partly also with a desire — which seems buried in the hearts of most women — to witness the struggles of her victims. She believed in herself thoroughly, both in her power to fascinate, and in her power to take good care of herself. Wilford in his own way was dangerous, as she had cause to know, but she had courted danger for the sake of excitement once, and she would face it again for Cahusac's sake now.

"Get up, Wilford, and remember that I have not forgiven the evening in Park Lane," she said still more coldly, stepping beyond his reach.

He stood up with some awkwardness.

"It was your own fault. You had worked to make me jealous of that fellow Cahusac. By Jove, Lorrie, you have been cruel to me!"

"I think you will allow that by your own conduct you forfeited any claim to my kindness."

"Can't you understand that I was sore and angry? Surely, I have been punished enough! Will you not forgive me even now, after all this banishment, after all you have made me suffer?" His handsome face was haggard. "I swear to you I have been miserable! Miserable? I have been ready to shoot myself!"

She looked keenly at him.

"And you have tried to drown your misery?"

"Yes," he answered defiantly; "I had no other comfort." Then, as she did not respond, he went on: "Forgive me, be kind to me! I tell you I have thought over what a beast I was to you that evening until I could have shot myself. Upon my soul, Lorrie, if I could make up my mind to leave you behind in this condemned old world, I'd take my life to-morrow!"

Lady Madesson shook her head with a half smile.

"Oh, no, Wil, you wouldn't — I know you far too well to believe that!"

He lit up at the change in her tone.

"Then I am forgiven?"

"We will say no more about it, unless —"

"Dearest!" He took her hand, and with a sudden movement drew her down on the couch beside him.

"Lorrie, you have thought about me sometimes, you have relented a little?"

"Relented? About what should I relent?" Then seeing the flash of strong emotion on his face, she hastily continued: "You say I have banished you, but you banished yourself. I have seen you nowhere."

"Didn't you know? I've been to Paris with de Sarsan; I was sent over by Alice to be out of the way of the family court to be held on my delinquencies. She always thinks I am safe with de Sarsan. What fools girls are! Paris at any time, you know, has its little snares for sinners like me, but this time!—" he laughed. "Lorrie, you are lovely, but you have a great deal to answer for!"

He leant nearer, but she opened her fan and laid it between them. For the very first time in her life, flattery and admiration gave her no pleasure. With an odd sense of having made a mistake, she felt that disgust had replaced the amused excitement which Wilford and his kind had been wont to awaken.

"Pray do not imagine you have made your peace. I don't think I like you to-day, Wil." She turned away petulantly. "Tell me about yourself."

"The more I tell you about Paris, the less you will like me, I'm afraid! But they were de Sarsan's friends mostly. One little fiend, called Ulpien Puyfot, oh, lord, to hear him! Ha-ha-ha!" he threw himself back and laughed.

"Puyfot. What was he?"

"A newspaper johnny. A rat to look at but a genius by his own showing."

A journalist, who was also a hanger-on of de Sarsan's? This sounded promising, so she asked:

"A genius? In what way? What did he talk about?"

"He says he has written a wonderful play which nobody appears to appreciate. As for his yarns, they are not repeatable — at least here. Once when he was hazy, he mentioned Malcolm. Fancy Cahusac the hero of one of those stories!" he glanced at her with a grin. "But let us talk of ourselves, Lorrie. Am I never to have an answer to the old, old question? Darling, I love you!"

"I wonder if you would love me so much if I were poor?" She put her arm on the back of the couch and her head upon her arm.

A whimsical expression crossed Lanceley's face.

"My dear girl, I should love you just as much and be as hot to marry you, but I don't know what the deuce we should have to live on!"

"What you are living on now, I suppose."

His features assumed an odd grimness.

"I wonder how you'd like it! Do you know what I am living on now?" he asked, as though he had suddenly made up his mind to speak out.

"I haven't a notion."

"On de Sarsan's charity!" he sneered. "And beastly inadequate I find it by way of an income!"

Lady Madesson's astonishment was genuine.

"Oh, he's got his own little game to win," resumed Wil; "he won't be the loser. My family refused to have anything more to say to me, and so I am stranded, you see."

"But your sister?"

"Her money's gone, too, unluckily."

Something in his aspect enlightened her.

"Wilford, you don't mean to say you —"

"Lord, Lorrie, shut up! I'm worn raw on that. Oh, yes, I have had something to do with it, but it was partly her own folly. I refuse to talk about it. The only point I want you to consider is this — whether you care to have your future husband hanging on to de Sarsan's pocket."

Lady Madesson sat up straight and grave.

"Does your sister know of this —?"

"Stop, don't give it a name! Matters are not so bad as you think. Nobody knows that de Sarsan's running me except Alice."

"Poor girl!" The involuntary exclamation escaped her.

"Not a bit of it, she'll come out all right! Never you fear. I should be worse than I am if I had not provided for that."

Lorrie was about to speak incisively, but checked herself.

"I have no right to ask any questions about her," she said.

"No, perhaps it's better not. But this brings me back to the same place. Will you marry me, Lorrie?"

She stood up and moved away.

"Why should I? I feel no definite need of you. I am very happy as it is."

"With me you would be very much happier. I am a beggar, and a bit of a rake. I don't pretend anything before you. I tell you the worst of myself, and you—" A real feeling broke his voice— "You know the best of me. You *make* the best of me! Have pity on me! Lorrie, I adore you, I could be anything you wished me to be! I used to think you cared for me a little once." He had followed her, and stood with clouded eyes watching the effect of his appeal.

"Perhaps I did a little — once," she said with a curious inflection in her tone which meant self-contempt, though he could not interpret it. Looking back, she remembered that his eager, boyish wooing had interested her at first, until she knew him. But now she hated him for it as she hated herself, and turned away that he might not see the hardening of her face.

"Sing to me," she said after a pause. "We will talk of all this another time."

He gazed at the lacy folds which clung about her full throat, then his eye strayed to the curve of her cheek, the temple under its waving fall of dark hair.

"Lorrie," he said with passion, "I think I could die happy if I had but kissed you once!"

CHAPTER XIX

"ASTORETH"

PUYFOT felt that he had been groping about for an eternity in some damp, dark underground passage, and was at last broken free into a radiance of sunshine that exalted, blinded, glorified.

Those wonderful days began with the rare element of a surprise, which included both good news and hope, and this after a period of profound dejection. But it did not stop there. He crossed to London on the summons — which included a generous cheque for travelling expenses — of the unknown patroness who had heard of his "Astoreth," to find that city of dismal memories and gloom and rain transfigured. Puyfot was a man who knew his own special London well, that part which comprises the purlieus of Leicester Square. But now London was no longer the region of hunger and suspicion and dreariness; it met him with a summer-time of alternate sunshine and shadow such as his strenuous life had never known. Sunshine in the warm glare of its parks, sunshine along the streets which led him on many days to a still square where a sharp line of shade upon the pavement marked his passing into cool shadows — or, to use sober words, Lady Madesson's house stood on the north side

— through which, as through a vestibule, he entered into a dim, flower-scented room of which he never gathered any definite idea, for to his perception it had nothing earthly about it, nothing he had felt or known before,— it was the haven of his dreams.

Vile as he was, in spite of his misapplication of his powers he remained the poet whose soul yearned for the stars. Intoxicated with a wild love, he yet looked upon Lorrie through purged eyes. She appealed to all that was highest and purest in him. Even ambition in its individual sense dropped away from him in those days of exaltation; he was strengthened, cleansed, uplifted; he brought his wondrous mood to bear upon his "Astoreth," and in scattered last touches made it what it is to-day, supreme.

This man, whose lacerated ambitions had in turn possessed and maddened him, their clamour always in his ears, eating into his brain and burning in his heart, beheld at the end of years of unhallowed drudgery the horned, deceptive, all-transfiguring moon of hope climb out of the wrack and murk of his squalid obscurity.

Lorrie was not to him what she was to Cahusac. Puyfot was a poet, and loved as one; he endowed her with a thousand poignant qualities, a thousand attributes for worship. He took her money, hoping one day to aspire to herself. He felt no sense of unworthiness, for was not his work to be her glorification? He dedicated to her his "Astoreth," that lurid and elemental transcript of humanity, loaded equally with art

and truth. By so doing he felt he was giving her immortality!

She, on her side, had shown him a new side of life. She followed him in his highest dreams easily, fully, comprehendingly. There was no star in the dark of unsoared heights whose sparkle she could not discern.

Yet the man's condition of mind was pitiable. He did not deceive himself in thinking that his reputation was unknown to her; he only deceived himself as to the motive that led her to interest herself in him. He believed that she saw him not as a collector of garbage for the Paris press — ah, no! she could see through and beyond that; to her he was the genius, the man of thought and boundless potentialities. He was not a fool but essentially a genius of a well-recognised variety; his vanity, hardened by a colossal impertinence, was ingrown.

He reviewed his capabilities, and was pleased with the result. He knew himself to be far above the common herd. But for chance and the devil, he might long ago have reached a pinnacle of fame to which de Sarsan with his all infernal luck could never attain.

It was an evening at dusk, the room cool, summery, the air flower-laden and thrilling with that suggestion of ease and culture which was the atmosphere Puyfot loved to breathe. On his way thither, as he strolled along the streets he had been telling himself a tale of hope; now in Lady Madesson's presence he was almost too agitated to do himself justice.

Suddenly she began to speak of his struggles, his

ambitions so long baffled, the unworthy work thrust upon him by his needs, of his many disappointments.

The creature of spurts and visions took fire.

"Madame!" he cried, "I have known all this, I have suffered all this, I have stooped to all this — I have been through Hades! But when the Fates cast my destiny, they ordained for me those years of misery. Had your noble kindness found me earlier in my life, to what heights should I already have risen?"

Lady Madesson's voice murmured sympathetically.

His thoughts amplified and intensified her words, a sudden hope choked him, his strange eyes blazed across the dimness of the room. It may be that Lady Madesson understood at that moment the manner of spirit she was raising.

"Yet I would not order my lot otherwise if I could," he pursued in rising excitement. "I have known a prolonged anguish, but the fact that I owe my present happiness and hopes to your hand repays me for all the past."

But Lorrie never lost control of any situation, she faced them with a composure that could calm storms. Turn a man to talk of himself and most difficult moments can be smoothed over.

"Tell me more of your sufferings, your struggles. What were they? How did you endure them for so long?"

He succumbed to the temptation. It is the red rag which a man will nearly always follow, forsaking his real aim and object for its delusive flutter.

"I have been in the mire. I offer no excuses. I had genius, it was necessary that I should live! You comprehend all when you comprehend this. You can sympathise. Your eyes are unclouded, you can see! Had I had talent only, I should have stood high enough by this time. Look at de Sarsan, great, rich, endowed with the power of keeping others down! Yet he has no spark of the true fire."

"And your tragedy? How did you write your tragedy?"

"By living one!"

"If you had been well-to-do and happy, would your 'Astoreth' ever have been written?" she asked quickly.

"But yes, of a surety! It is beautiful to talk of a garret. But more good work has died in garrets than ever came out of them. Had I had money, a hundred actors would have been crying out for my tragedy. If the world can see no reason why one should write save that one is driven by the force and prompting of genius, it despises the work. It assesses a man at his purse's valuation and at no other. See you!" he stood up in his excitement and raised his hands and shook them, "Imagine, Madame, if, before you sent for me, before my 'Astoreth' had become known, I had died!"—he almost sobbed as he confronted this desperate thought—"imagine what the world would have lost, irrecoverably lost! Imagine it, Madame!"

"A loss indeed!"

"Had I written *feuilletons*," he resumed more

calmly, "I should now have been prosperous, popular. But all these things I threw aside for Art. And how has Art repaid me? What have I been until to-day? A hawker of despised wares! My great drama thrust back upon me by men who would sift the dust in the streets for scraps of offal!" his voice rose again.

"But that day is past," she said. "'Astoreth' will give you fame."

"Madame, I have outraged every noble instinct to hold my soul still within my body until my child — the agonised offspring of my soul — should be breathed upon and live! You, lady, are the goddess whose breath has infused vitality into those dead limbs. Imagine the future! Figure to yourself Astoreth when she moves and speaks and inthrals the world! At once I shall rise to the serenity which lies beyond the reach of critics. I am already writing the story of my struggles. The papers will repeat much, and unborn biographers write of Ulpien Puyfot — and of you, Madame! Our names shall be handed down together, the man who created, the woman who discovered!"

"No," she said in an even tone, "I did not discover you. You have never asked me that question. I should never have known of you had not someone who heard you declaim 'Astoreth' told me of you!" She smiled. Here was her first move towards the end she desired to attain.

Puyfot stared at her. The thought that some hu-

man being intervened between the two whom he had just designated as creator and discoverer jarred upon his frenzy.

"I have not given it a thought, Madame. What does it matter?"

"The connecting link should not be forgotten in so illustrious a chain," she replied gravely. "You owe more to him than to me."

"Does he want my gratitude?" snarled Puyfot with a quick change of tone. "He could have won it years ago had he desired. He has kept me down from my youth. Madame, I cannot tell you how dark a shadow he has thrown upon my life. Gratitude! No! to you alone I am grateful! Let him be, he is full of success and wealth and selfish enjoyments. I have no gratitude for him!"

"But you speak of knowing him well, of owing him many of your disappointments. Whom are you thinking of?"

"Of de Sarsan!" he almost spat out the name.

She bent forward, shaking her head with one of her rarest smiles, her face lit with the pleasure of speaking of the man she loved.

"Oh, no, not Monsieur de Sarsan! You have seen your real friend but once in your life. And he owes you no kindness, far from it! For you have deeply wronged him, you have injured him more than de Sarsan has injured you!"

Puyfot was utterly taken aback. "Madame, it is impossible!" he exclaimed.

"You have called yourself unfortunate," she went on in a tone that arrested him. "But your friend, the best you have ever known, is even more so. You have assailed him with slanders and calumny, you have called upon the world to aid you in hunting him down. Yet he is blameless, his whole life has been blameless! His father was murdered years ago — he died for his country as truly as if he had fallen in battle — yet you drew an inference of infamy from that death with which to hurt the son. Oh, you have indeed been pitiless!"

Puyfot's wizened face shrank together under her reproaches uttered in the voice of velvet that he adored.

"I, Madame, I?"

"Do not deny it to me, Monsieur, for I know," rejoined Lorrie, sadly. She had drawn her bow at a venture but the shot told.

"Is it then Monsieur Malcolm Cahusac of whom you speak?" Puyfot asked. He admitted her accusation without shame. "Was it he who told you of me — of 'Astoreth'? Why, yes, I can remember! I was pronouncing the lover's appeal to Astoreth when he entered my room. He praised them as great lines! Yet, Madame, the next moment his mouth was full of threats!"

"But naturally!" she retorted, borrowing his own French mode of expression, "You have also been injured; is your mouth full of blessings?"

She was working upon his mood with every word she spoke. He began eagerly in self-defence.

"Madame, I, personally, had no malicious intentions towards him! I injured him perhaps — yes; but we who live as I have lived think little of rumours of this kind!" he snapped his fingers.

"That may be so, but you know that it is far otherwise in England. You are well aware that such accusations are not lightly regarded here," she said with some indignation.

"I do not deny it. Yet, in truth, I gave no thought to that view of the matter. I have already explained to you that I considered myself bound to live by all means in my power for the sake of 'Astoreth.' He appealed to me — I recall it now — yet I could do no other than refuse him. You will admit that?" he argued.

She looked at him with blue, unfathomable eyes. She pictured that interview, Malcolm's suffering pride and his despair and she had no room for pity left towards Puyfot, although by nature she was very pitiful. But the most pitiful women are also women of the strongest natures and they have in them a counter strain of inexorable pitilessness. With those who are happiest, this may never awake, its existence be never known even to themselves. Lorrie's life had been of the kind that develops the whole gamut of feeling, and at this moment she resolved to use her influence over Puyfot to the last remorseless limit. She would spare him in nothing. She realised the man's depravity, his rancour, his evil-mindedness, and her revulsion of feeling rose almost beyond her power

to disguise. This dreamer in whose tainted blood genius and scurrility ran allied! She failed to see that the man carried in himself his assigned punishment.

"It may once have been necessary for you to submit to de Sarsan," she said at last, trying to keep a failing hold upon her patience. "But is it so any longer? Would it not be possible to set M. Cahusac right in the eyes of the world even now?"

"It is not my affair, Madame; it is the affair of M. de Sarsan. Without him I can do nothing. I should not have told you so much, but I trust you as myself."

"M. de Sarsan has no more power over you," she urged. "Use your independence and do justice."

Puyfot rose. "Alas! I have not yet escaped the reach of his arm," he replied, despondently. "I cannot explain, but —"

"You must tell me."

"Some day, Madame, perhaps, some day, when 'Astoreth' has claimed the hearing of the Universe and my thoughts are free, I would wish to tell you more of my history. It is a record of courage! At that time I will speak of de Sarsan and of this Cahusac. I shall then be of the great ones of the world myself! I have waited for many years. To-day the power is mine to make another man wait — M. Cahusac. Let him also learn what it means to wait — wait!"

CHAPTER XX

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

M. DE SARSAN had acted generously. Mrs. Westaway had told him so, the compliment being confirmed by a look of relief and gratitude from Alice's pretty eyes. He felt as self-complacent and cheerful as a benevolent man has a right to feel. Alice had begged that the engagement might not be made public yet awhile, and de Sarsan, after some flattering demur, had given in handsomely. In fact, it struck him as being in some respects a convenient arrangement. It often happens that the longer you can mask your game, the worse for your opponents.

It must be conceded that Alice Lanceley's motive was a commonplace one, merely to put off the evil day. The announcement would not only serve to rivet her yoke, but to destroy the other hope which she still weakly cherished. She craved for one more interview with Malcolm, a time in which to explain, to say to him that she understood his position and would never blame him, to tell him much that she had often longed to say but never been able to frame — trifles, perhaps, but of great moment to her. It must not be supposed that she contemplated breaking her promise to de Sarsan: she did not waver in that.

It was a sacrifice which she must make for Wilford's sake—(she now believed that had she been alone she would have chosen rather to face the world)—and she meant to make the sacrifice in good faith. Meanwhile she could not find the courage to turn the lock on possibility and hope.

She longed to meet with Malcolm in some happy hour when she could set herself right with him. She feared his condemnation, she wept as she pictured his contempt, when he should hear of, without understanding, her acceptance of de Sarsan—of a man whom he, Malcolm, abhorred. Her apprehensions moved round and round in the same hapless groove; she could not conceive of the broad, pitying kindness with which Cahusac would have judged her.

Great catastrophes are usually referred to the working of great passions, but the machinery of fate is often set in motion by some weak desire, some foolish impulse, some unnecessary vanity or puerility. The irony of the thing lies in the fact that those who touch the levers are so seldom damaged in the final crash.

The tremendous results which were to follow upon Alice's rash wish to set herself right with Malcolm were hidden from her eyes always. She never realised from first to last that it was her hand which brought about the consummation of the tragedy.

It happened on a day towards the end of June. De Sarsan had begged, by way of a return for allowing the engagement to be kept secret till the end of

the season, that the marriage should take place immediately afterwards. Even Wilford was, by Alice's request, to be kept in ignorance for the present. He saw that de Sarsan was paying court to his sister and was apparently well received, and he might have guessed the rest for himself if his mind had not been entirely taken up with his own affairs.

Lorrie indeed saw him pretty often, but other people were always present. He had had no chance of urging his suit afresh, and in consequence his humour was one of chronic peevishness. Therefore on this balmy June morning he lounged about the dining-room at Park Lane, and grumbled freely.

Alice, who was answering notes for Mrs. Westaway, tried to suggest subjects more cheering than his own affairs, but he would none of them. After a while he stood drumming on the window pane in silence. Alice had had time to write half a dozen notes before he spoke again.

"I say, Alice, stop scribbling for a minute. Can't you write at some other time except just when I happen to drop in?" he said crossly, then turning round. "Come here, I want you to do something for me."

Alice got up obediently and stood beside him.

"For heaven's sake, don't stand like that, as if you were in a hurry and couldn't listen to a man quietly for once! Sit down." He pushed a chair towards her and sat on the edge of the table. "We're in a devil of a hole, you and I," he began dejectedly —"in a devil of a hole! Now just look at you—"

"Suppose we look at you for the moment. Tell me what I can do for you," she said, with a little smile, anxious to avoid the inevitable turn of the conversation in the direction of de Sarsan, if her own future came under discussion.

"Oh, very well, if you don't want my advice!" he rejoined huffily; "but I tell you you'd be wise to hook de Sarsan while you can get him. It would be only decent, considering what the fellow is doing for me just now. And look here," as a happy inspiration suddenly struck him, "I've been thinking that you would prefer to have me off his hands before it came to a question of marriage between you — eh?"

"I don't see what I can do," said the girl with great embarrassment.

"Well, that's just what I'm here to tell you; isn't it, stupid?" but his tone was coaxing and good humoured now, and Alice smiled up at him in relief at the somewhat unusual fact. "Now, Alice, put aside prejudice, like a good girl, and don't refuse my request in a hurry. I want you to go and see Lady Madesson."

Alice turned white.

"I?"

"Yes, you!" mimicking her tone. "I mean to marry Lorrie, and, after all, why should you object? She's as good as you are any day in the week, as well as cleverer and richer and handsomer, if it comes to that!"

Alice was very still, wondering in her heart if Malcolm thought so too by this time.

"She — she is said to be engaged to Malcolm," she said after a minute.

Wilford sprang to his feet and seized her by the shoulder.

"Who told you that infernal lie?"

"M. de Sarsan."

"Oh, de Sarsan!" He sat down again relieved. He understood that de Sarsan might say something of the kind to further his own purposes. "It may be so, of course, but I'd like to make sure. Alice, I care for that woman more than anything in creation, or heaven — if there is such a place. It is perhaps the one honest feeling left about me. Don't take upon yourself to condemn it. Go to her for my sake and tell her how it is with me, that the suspense is destroying me! She has a kind nature below all — get at her, touch her. You can do the trick for me if you put heart in it, Alice, will you? Upon my word of honour, I believe that marriage would make a decent man of me!"

"Very well," the girl said, "I will go, though I don't suppose I can do any good. She is so clever!"

She sighed, and Wil looked quizzically at her with some significance.

"Cheer up, old lady, it's the stupid ones who mostly win in the end, you know!" he said ambiguously.

After he had gone, Alice collected her notes into

a heap, setting them one over the other with an air of abstraction. Accredited with such an errand she could hardly fail to find out how Malcolm stood in relation to Lady Madesson.

After lunch, she drove over to the quiet square where lay Puyfot's dreamland. Dismissing the hansom at the entrance to it, she walked along the pavement very slowly, for now that she was almost at the door she felt very little of the courage or self-confidence necessary for such an interview.

Counting the numbers ahead, she had just picked out the flower-laden porch as the one she was looking for when a man emerged from its shadow and came towards her.

It was Malcolm. She stopped short, breathless. She saw his face change as he recognised her, and her heart throbbed more painfully.

Distracted by her troubled thoughts she looked just like a lost child, and as he shook hands with her, he said involuntarily:

"Can I not help you, Alice? Where are you going?"

"I want to see Lady Madesson — I want to see her alone," she replied confusedly.

Here was the very opportunity of talking with Malcolm that she had been longing for, and she must take advantage of it to make that explanation which was to render her life more endurable in the future.

"Why, she has some people to lunch," he answered

with manifest surprise. "I have been there myself and am one of the first to leave."

"Oh, dear! and I wanted so much to see her alone!"

Cahusac was perplexed at Alice's anxiety for a private talk with Lorrie whom he knew she had never liked, but he concluded that it must be on some errand of her brother's and he wondered what selfish object Wil could have in view.

"I will take you to Lady Madesson's house and let her know," he suggested. "I am sure she would be very glad to see you."

"Oh, no! that would not do at all!" she scarcely knew what to say. "It will be better for me to come another time. Would you walk with me till I see a hansom?"

He turned beside her. "But why not go to Lady Madesson's now?" he said, for his old wish that Alice and Lorrie should be friends returned upon him with force.

"I think I ought to tell you, Malcolm, that I have a message for her from Wil," she answered, speaking hurriedly under the recollection of what de Sarsan had told her respecting her companion and Lady Madesson. "You know that Wil cares for her very much — you remember that evening at Ashmills? — I wonder if she — if she likes him?" She was aware that she was saying precisely those things she should not say, "But I beg your pardon, I ought not to talk like this to you."

Malcolm was smiling. "Why not? Though I am afraid I cannot tell you what you want to know for she has not confided in me."

They turned the corner as he spoke. From the other end of the street an empty hansom was approaching. At the sight of it Alice felt that the chance of disburdening her mind, of conveying to Malcolm all that she had prepared through the long nights since she saw him last, was fast vanishing.

"I have been wishing to meet you, Malcolm — there are so many things I have to say to you," she faltered. "The other evening I tried to tell you — I cannot make you understand — I don't know how to begin," she wrung her gloved hands together.

Cahusac was very much in love, or perhaps much of this conversation would have seemed rather absurd to him; as it was pity and tenderness claimed him to the exclusion of everything else.

"What is it you want to say to me?" he said gently, walking still more slowly. "I will understand."

"In the future, when we cannot explain to each other, will you try to believe that I am not so very much to blame!" she went on. "I cannot help — things happening."

His face grew hard. What in the world was she alluding to?

"What sort of things?"

In her bewilderment she did not notice the change in his voice.

"I mean if you were to marry someone — anyone — I should know that — that you could not help it," she said timidly. "I have felt how hard it is to make one's life fit in with what one would like it to be." Then her growing agitation wrung the true cry from her heart. "But oh! Malcolm, don't you think that happiness is worth more than all the other things? Nothing matters as long as we are with those we love! And yet we all seem to be struggling for money and things that don't make us a bit happy in the end. Is it worth while to give up so much for so little?"

She had found speech at the end, she was pleading for lost love and lost happiness, her mind was plunged into a chaos of feeling and retrospect, and her main idea was to impart to him some of the thoughts which ached so continually in her own breast.

The hot afternoon street was almost empty, so that Wilford on his way to Lorrie Madesson's — for he intended to strike while the iron was hot from Alice's fanning — was astonished to see his sister walking beside Malcolm Cahusac, with her hands clasped in evident emotion.

"Good heavens!" he reflected, "if de Sarsan were to get wind of this and that I had sent her here by herself, he'd dock my allowance worse than ever! I wonder how Malcolm got hold of her!"

He walked rapidly after them. As he came up he could hear Alice speaking.

"Oh, but do you think it is the best? It is so easy to say things are best for one which only mean more money, better position — but it is not true! The richest princess in the world can be very unhappy!"

"Alice!"

Wil caught her by the arm very quietly, but she hardly suppressed a scream. Then he turned upon Cahusac. "How dared you induce my sister to meet you in this clandestine manner?"

Cahusac glanced at Wil and smiled in spite of himself.

"Don't be absurd, Wil! This is not a melodrama, but an ordinary meeting together of three people who have known each other all their lives. I chanced to meet Alice in Devos Square and offered to find her a cab."

Wil scowled after Malcolm as he walked away but he said no more until he and Alice were driving back to Park Lane.

What he said then and Alice's feeble excuses need not be written down. Her greatest offence lay in her failure to see Lorrie Madesson.

"What? Go to see her to-morrow?" he ended harshly. "No! for goodness' sake don't! Leave it alone; you'd be sure to bungle the whole thing! And stop crying."

When he left her, he was in a white heat of disappointment and rash anger. At such times he felt

an irresistible desire to talk to anybody, it mattered little to whom. He forgot prudence and set out for de Sarsan's.

He found the Belgian at home and in his irritability, he made the most of the earnest and almost impassioned interview he had cut short. De Sarsan listened patiently until the flow of complaint and temper had run itself out. Then he asked:

"What induced your sister to go to Devos Square?"

"To see Lorrie — if you want to know."

"On your affairs?"

"I'm hanged if I'm going to be cross-questioned!" answered Wil with heat. De Sarsan's way of turning the tables upon him was intolerable.

"Ah, so? I understand," said de Sarsan.

And this was the very beginning of the end.

CHAPTER XXI

DE SARSAN MOVES AGAIN

STARTING from the basis of his own experience, de Sarsan judged Alice hardly, far more hardly than she at all deserved. Her innocent attempt to forestall Cahusac's judgment of her assumed an altogether different and unpleasant complexion seen through the Belgian's eyes. He did her so much justice as to believe that Cahusac was chiefly to blame, yet he disliked the incident and prepared to take strong measures to ensure against a recurrence of it.

To speak to Alice herself was, of course, from his standpoint the very last thing to be done. Wilford's story had somewhat spoilt his ideal of her artlessness. Therefore he deemed it wiser to hold his knowledge in reserve for future use and guidance. He had hoped by continual newspaper attacks to rid himself of the young man's rivalry, but it seemed that only a very partial success had attended his efforts. He hated Cahusac the more, indeed time and circumstance were forcing his hatred to a height of embitterment that began to influence his usually cool judgment. He resolved to be rid of Cahusac at all costs; it only remained to make the last blow decisive.

First he would order a wide revival of the damaging

paragraphs. So far he was safe, for he knew that Cahusac could hardly take action for libel without exposing his stepmother's unfortunate connection with events. And then he would make another move, which if more dangerous would be, he believed, far more certain in its results. Fortune favoured such a step at the moment, for he had recently been able to oblige a personage who was temporarily in a prominent position in politics. A hint to this gentleman, aided by a little clever engineering in the right quarter and the unpleasant rumours circulating about Sir Malcolm Cahusac might be made the subject of a question in Parliament.

Only under strong pressure of feeling would de Sarsan have been tempted to resort to such a measure, for elements of danger to himself were undoubtedly connected with it. Hitherto he had stood before the world as entirely disassociated from the Cahusac affair, and from motives of prudence he wished to remain so. Puyfot alone had known him as the originator of the slanderous articles, and Puyfot he held in the hollow of his hand. But the Belgian would not allow these fears to deter him, for he hoped that if ever awkward revelations were made, he would have strengthened his position — made it practically impregnable by his marriage into the Lanceley family.

It therefore happened that on an early afternoon a small gentleman arose on one of the cross benches. He had a question to ask the Secretary for Foreign Affairs. He wished to draw the Right Honourable

gentleman's attention to certain articles that had of late frequently appeared in various newspapers. He then proceeded to read aloud telling extracts, and concluded by inquiring what action His Majesty's Government had taken or intended to take in the matter. The Secretary for Foreign Affairs replied shortly that the subject was under consideration. Some further sentences were exchanged and the small and honourable member sat down with a busy-body's pleased consciousness of having hindered for a certain time at any rate the progress of urgent public business.

Two or three of the papers reported the gist of the little member's speech and added by way of pendant that it was to be hoped in the public interest that something would be done to clear up quickly and satisfactorily the imputations cast upon so eminent a servant of the nation as the late Sir Malcolm Cahusac. They had no doubt that adequate steps to this end would immediately be taken.

The information reached Cahusac with the morning newspapers. He had been out of town overnight. A couple of hours later, he was accorded an interview by one of these gentlemen of whom England rarely hears by name, but to whose intelligence and single-mindedness she owes so much. They remain permanently at their posts, and it is upon the pivot of their knowledge and experience that the Ministers, who successively represent the Department, turn and work.

Sir Berrit Fraynes was a thin ascetic-looking man, somewhat stooped at the shoulders. He stated the case to Cahusac very kindly but plainly.

"It appears to me," said he, "that you must take an action for libel against the papers in question. Publicity about one's private affairs is disagreeable, but I am afraid in this case it is unavoidable!"

A slight show of blood tinged Cahusac's face. "Surely my father's name stands too high to need defence."

"It needs none here, of course. He was the contemporary and friend of many of us, I am happy to include myself in the number. But to the man in the street he is no more than a name. And you have to deal with a world always ready to lend an ear to calumny. It appears to me that you have no alternative but to bring an action for libel."

Sir Berrit looked at Cahusac who was very pale. For this was precisely the course which he had feared would be thrust upon him, it was the course that all who knew of the matter had been expecting him to take, but alas! it was the one thing he dared not do. Here lay the single weak point in his armour, the weak point upon which de Sarsan had counted, Cahusac would not risk the chance of any revelation of the disastrous form of blackmail that Lady Cahusac had in her fear and her weakness been persuaded to pay.

"I am sorry there are reasons why I cannot bring an action for libel," said the young man.

Sir Berrit smoothed his moustache thoughtfully.

"Will you trust me with those reasons?" he asked after a pause.

"I hope you will forgive me for saying that though I am unable to speak of them, they are good reasons."

"It is exceedingly unfortunate that you cannot take public notice of these slanders," said Sir Berrit drily, "for it is inevitable that people will think it odd you should permit such attacks and remain passive."

"I do not intend to remain passive. For months past I have been investigating and working in my own way, which I believe will in the end exonerate my father from these malicious accusations. I am sorry not to follow your advice but I must take my own way in this business."

"You are possibly right in carrying out the plan that seems best to you. At the same time, the sooner you show you are doing something, the better, for half London is waiting to see you bring these fellows to book, and you should not forget that a slander grown stale is a poison for which there is frequently no antidote."

"I am sure of that, and I was going to ask for special leave of absence that I might have more time to give to this affair."

"Suppose we say three months' leave; does that meet your ideas? I can arrange that."

"Thank you." Cahusac was about to rise.

"Wait a moment."

Fraynes paused, absently tapping the papers on

the desk with a bony forefinger. "I remember your father very well, and I should like to mention to you some facts which may help you in your future inquiries. I spent a part of last night in looking through certain old documents and records — they make extraordinarily interesting reading I assure you. And I happened to come upon some entries which appear to me to bear upon this present business. Almost immediately after Sir Malcolm's death, secret information of importance began to find its way out of this Office. At that time Lord Luxillin was our Chief here; am I right in thinking that he was the brother of Lady Cahusac?"

"Yes." It was all that Malcolm could say. Was Fraynes bordering upon some chance discovery of his stepmother's guilt?

But Sir Berrit continued composedly: "It has never been discovered through whose instrumentality those revelations were made. And yet for a very considerable period, information oozed out. Sometimes there might be a break of months, but the trouble would begin again and so it went on for years. Then the leakage ceased as suddenly as it had begun. This was some few years ago. Matters have fallen back into their ordinary course."

Malcolm said nothing. He waited for the other to go on.

"Now, it appears to me," resumed Fraynes, "that this mysterious leakage, commencing as it did just *after the* assassination of your father, may have had

some connection with his death. He, perhaps, stood in the way of the spy, who was obliged to be rid of him before he could with safety enter upon his nefarious work here."

"My father is supposed to have been stabbed by a foreigner, though on what grounds I do not know," said Malcolm, "for, as you are aware, the police never found any trace of the murderer. I wish I could get to the bottom of the mystery. I thank you for having told me this. It confirms my own opinion that the persons who killed my father must be connected with those who are now trying to destroy his reputation."

"It seems likely, very likely."

Malcolm rose. "I will follow your advice and spend my time in running these people to earth, if I can."

He took leave of Sir Berrit, and went out into the roaring streets with a strange sense of remoteness from the life about him, the life to which he had been accustomed through the years of his manhood. In spite of Fraynes' kindly treatment of him, he knew that his refusal to institute a libel action must seem both odd and unaccountable in the eye of his Chief.

CHAPTER XXII

LORRIE

It was a cloudy day of damp heat. Two or three weeks had slipped away since Cahusac's interview with Sir Berrit, weeks entirely barren of results as far as any increase of information was concerned and yet Malcolm had spent himself mind and body in efforts to attain it. He had crossed to Paris, only to find that Puyfot was no longer there. But though Cahusac could gather no further knowledge of the facts connected with Sir Malcolm's death, he became more than ever convinced that the key to the situation lay between Puyfot and de Sarsan. Patiently he unravelled the tangled lines of loose gossip in the papers and each led him back to Puyfot.

On his return to town he found that as Fraynes had foretold, people were beginning to find it curious that he had not at once taken action against the *Gaslamp* and its confrères. It appeared inconceivable that he should allow such a calumny to pass unnoticed. As the story drifted from tongue to tongue, someone made the inevitable inference that either he was callous beyond belief, or that he had cause for keeping silent. And though little showed on the surface, *Malcolm* began to be conscious of a cooling of man-

ner and regard among his acquaintance, while his own connections openly blamed him.

And yet he could do nothing but wait upon chance. Although he had so strong and unfortunate a reason for his present attitude, he was nevertheless by no means without a definite plan. That plan was one to which all strong natures come when balked by circumstances. He would put his trust in the strength of his own hand and brain, he would, he must in the end mark down the murderer of his father, and armed with that knowledge, he had no doubt whatever that he would have the power to take the situation into his own hands.

But just at this period he could not quite see the next step he should take. Happening to glance through his invitations, he was forced to acknowledge that they had of late grown fewer. His eye lit on one which he had accepted a month previously. It was for the same afternoon, a huge garden party, that always formed one of the events of the season. He was in the mood to see how society would treat him, and he set out with something of curiosity and it may be more of defiance in his mind.

His destination lay in the outskirts of London, where the din of the city, like the hum of a shell, was audible only to the listening ear. In the level light the grass still looked green and vivid, but the leaves upon the trees showed dark with the premature ageing of city foliage.

Cahusac saw at once that his appearance created

much inquisitive interest. He passed from group to group, taking each cold look with apparent indifference, and making believe to himself that each was but a fresh satire upon the ways of the smart world. Frigid greetings, for the most part, were his lot. Presently he saw a small throng of people, just such a knot as forms itself about a favoured person whom society for the time being delights to honour. Stragglers from other parts of the lawn were there, those who had seen the cold-shoulder turned upon him elsewhere. He recognised several, for nervous susceptibility gives a man a hundred eyes, and knowing that the whole group were not about to be taken by surprise but were prepared with their reception, he sauntered towards them with some dim idea that it would smack of cowardice to retreat.

But before he reached them, four people walking together, came out from behind a flanking bank of rhododendrons and met him face to face, Mrs. Westaway, de Sarsan, Wil and Alice. The girl made an impulsive movement towards him, but de Sarsan, bending nearer to her, uttered a decisive word or two. Cahusac saw her hesitate, she gave him a piteous look, but — she turned away with her companions!

No blow yet struck at Cahusac had wounded him quite so sorely. Not for himself, the stab of pain it inflicted hurt him most for Alice's sake. They must, at last, have persuaded or compelled her to give de Sarsan the right to impose his will on her actions.

Poor gentle Alice! And there was no one to save her from her fate. He saw Wil speak angrily, and before the Belgian could stop him, turn to retrace his steps.

"Look here, Malcolm," he panted.

Cahusac stopped. Wil was looking more than usually pale and his height added gauntness to his figure.

"I want to say that we do not wish to continue the pleasure of your acquaintance."

Cahusac made no reply but began to move on.

"D'you understand?" went on Wil, irritated by Malcolm's casual reception of the affront. "You are not to speak to Alice again. It's hardly decent for a man in — in your position to force yourself into the company of respectable people."

"What is my position?" Malcolm faced him.

"Hang it all! You know what the papers and everybody are saying," stammered Wilford.

"What are they saying?" inquired Cahusac calmly.

"That you dare not go to law with those papers who are blackguarding your father, that there's some queer story behind it all, and that you've got to put up with the worst they can say. See? And in spite of that you have ventured to think of Alice? But she's going to marry de Sarsan! And jolly lucky to get him and to escape such as you! You and your father —"

"Stop, this instant!"

He met Malcolm's eyes and the flare dropped from his own. He stood without speaking for a moment, then he moved away in the wake of his party.

Malcolm walked on. The incident had stirred him to wretchedness, but it also urged him forward. The little crowd ahead watched his approach as Cahusac advanced with an air of absolute self-possession.

Suddenly from the heart of the group, one figure detached itself and came towards him with that peculiarly graceful carriage for which American women are remarkable.

"You are late, Mr. Cahusac," said Lorrie Madesson. "I have been expecting you all the afternoon."

The incident took him at unawares. "Have you heard —" he began.

Without replying at once, she led him away across an open space of green sward. Presently she said: "I have heard everything that has been said or written about you during the last few days."

"A good many people have failed to see me this afternoon, and — and — you are very kind, Lady Madesson, but you must allow me to bid you goodbye."

Lorrie laughed. "You cannot get rid of me so easily." Then she added in a different tone. "I imagined that you and I were fighting out this trouble together."

"No, no!"

"We made some such compact months ago, didn't we?"

"I had no idea matters would go so far," he expostulated.

"I should be a poor sort of partisan if I deserted my side at the first hint of unpopularity." She smiled.

"I understand your generosity, but I will not allow you — to be mixed up in this unfortunate affair."

"You are under my orders at this moment," she said peremptorily. "You do not know in what way I have been working for you, and the least you can do at this moment is to act as I wish. Come!"

Up and down the lawns the couple passed, Cahusac suffering infinitely more now than he had suffered when alone. His pride, his generosity and his manliness were all on fire. Lorrie, a woman! stood between him and the world! He could hardly endure it.

The ordeal came to an end at last. Lorrie took leave of her hostess, adding that she was going to drive Cahusac back to town.

In those days motors were rare, but Lady Madesson, sharing the aptitude of her race for making trial of all things new and likely to be good, already owned a car of one of the best French makes. Into this she swept Cahusac and the car glided down the long windings of the drive, through the heraldic gates, and so on into the slowly increasing roar of London. The outlying and scattered houses of the suburbs drew into the closer ranks of streets and these again joined one to the other in continuous lines and cross lines, till they showed the density of build-

ing which distinguishes the chief human antheaps of the earth.

All this time the two occupants of the car sat silent. Cahusac because at first embarrassment and, it must be owned, a certain vexation hindered speech, later because he became obsessed with painful thoughts of which the knowledge of Alice's engagement was foremost. Lorrie took care not to interrupt his reverie, she was not blind to his vexation. She knew that must quickly exhaust itself; as for the smouldering of bitter thoughts, she hoped to fan them into words. She was a wise woman who understood the worth of the old adage, "Hurry no man's cattle."

Presently leaving Holland Park Avenue behind, they reached Kensington Gardens. Lorrie stopped the car at Porchester Gate.

"I am going to walk home through the Gardens," she said. "Will you come with me, or can the car drop you anywhere?"

Cahusac woke almost with a start from his abstraction. Lorrie's lovely eyes of deep blue were not to be resisted.

"With you, if I may."

"We can talk in peace now," she said as they walked side by side. "Why would you not come to see me before you left for Paris? Oh, yes, Colonel Detching told me!"

She wanted to rouse Malcolm and trained her guns *right to the* heart of the subject.

"I felt I had no business to worry you with my affairs," he replied in a little confusion.

"That was ungracious of you, to say the least of it."

"It was churlish! I see it now," exclaimed Malcolm. "Unpardonable."

"Very nearly unpardonable. Besides, as a matter of fact you caused me a good many bad half hours which you might have saved me," she rejoined drily.

"How? How could that have been?"

"Those I spent in finding out for myself, but I can assure you they were really very bad half hours."

"But why should you trouble about — my — the matter?" he stammered.

"The insatiable curiosity of a woman, I suppose," she said, and Malcolm looked down keenly at her. Was it possible that Detching, the faithful, had so far betrayed him? But, no, she was speaking naturally. "I think it began with Guy's words — do you remember them? 'I'll back London to keep her secret.' I think I want to prove if London can."

"She can!" returned Malcolm with conviction. "One may now and then escape by chance, but she holds most of them too close."

"She shall not hold this one!" exclaimed Lorrie. "You and I and Colonel Detching are not three people who like being beaten."

Her look and tone more than the words sent a thrill

of hope through Malcolm. He recognised, the next instant, that it was quite an emotional and unreasonable hope, but it remained with him all the same. In this conclusion, he omitted the fact that a gallant spirit gives out some indefinable quality which leads to victory more often than is ordinarily realised.

"If you can spare the time we might sit here and I would tell you what I have done since that evening when you first spoke to me of M. de Sarsan," he said aloud.

They made their way between the trees to the nearest chairs. To Lorrie came a keen remembrance of their last conversation by the Kensington Palace walk, but she could not flatter herself that any such thought occurred to her companion, who was manifestly engrossed with the present moment.

"It was wonderful of you to guess that he was the man!" continued Malcolm. "I have been following up the clue you gave me, and every point I discover only makes it more certain. He is undoubtedly a secret service agent, working for himself, not for his country, which is the only palliation one can find for the career of a spy. But I never get beyond the fact of his enmity to me. I know he hates me, but I cannot find out how he comes to have so complete a knowledge of all those events in the past."

"To begin with, I believe he took part in all those events! — I believe he was present. I believe he — Oh, I can put no limit to my belief in that man's wick*edness!*" exclaimed Lorrie.

To her amazement a look of actual horror spread over Malcolm's face.

"Good God! You must be right! You've been right before! And that scoundrel is going to marry Alice!"

"Not Alice Lanceley? I have heard nothing of it!" But her voice though shocked, was a little cold.

"Wil told me at the Sheringhams." He was about to say more, but checked himself.

"What a dreadful idea!" The coldness was gone from Lorrie's voice. "Poor little girl, she does not deserve such a fate!"

Cahusac had taken off his hat and now he passed his hand hastily over his hair with a helpless, yet desperate action that brought Lorrie to the verge of laughter and tears. She loved the man, loved him and pitied him and was half angry with him for the folly of his infatuation for Alice, but above all she felt the longing to make his path of life straight and pleasant once again, to see the careless happiness in his eyes that she remembered seven years ago during their voyage from the States. In that instant she realised how much she was ready to sacrifice for him. Life? That would be little indeed! But there were other sacrifices far harder to make — would any one of them be beyond the measure of her love?

"Do you know," she said in her soft voice, "you have never really told me anything about your father's death. I am quite sure that I can help you, but you will make it far easier for me if you will tell me the story of all that has happened."

"It will be only too good of you to listen to it," he said and forthwith began.

He told her of Sir Malcolm's murder, of the fruitless efforts of the police to find any trace of the murderer. He told her of the mysterious visitor who carried so terrible a tale to Lady Cahusac's ears in the first hours of her loss, when, distracted by grief she yielded to the demand for blackmail, which she continued to pay practically to the last. The single fact he withheld was the nature of the blackmail the unhappy lady had paid, he could not bring himself to let fall any hint of that, nor indeed did he think it necessary. He went on to tell of his return from America, and of his premonition of misfortune on that evening, of his stepmother's disclosures and her obstinate refusal to reveal the name of the blackmailer, of her discovery of those important letters which were to be their release from the exactions to which she had so long submitted.

"I remember going into the library and turning on the electric light just above the cabinet. I took the key in my hand, I put it into the drawer and pulled the drawer open, I saw the two letters tied together in a very flat packet with thin cord and had them actually in my grasp — after that I remember no more until I saw Detching's face hanging over me with an expression I'll never forget, half of pity, half of a piercing enquiry. Then his face altered, but that first look left us friends from that day to this."

"You were lucky in that at any rate," said Lorrie definitely. "He is the best friend I know of."

He turned to her with eagerness. How beautiful she looked. She was wearing a large hat of a deep blue that matched her eyes and enhanced the exquisite colouring of her face. Could it be possible that Detching had a chance, he thought?

"I wish he could hear you say that!" he exclaimed.

She smiled as she met his glance. "He has heard me," she said.

That was all, but Cahusac knew that his friend's dream was hopeless, and that Detching understood it was so. Cahusac made haste to continue. He felt as if he had surprised a secret.

"I had been knocked down by a blow on the side of the head and the robber in making his escape struck at my stepmother also. He missed her, but the door lintel showed a deep mark. The letters were gone, but nothing else had been touched, so we may fairly conclude that whoever took the letters must have been the one person to whom they were essential.— My stepmother died a few weeks later, she never spoke a sane word after the terror of that night, but she had been in bad health and much harassed for many years."

"Harassed for years. Ah, yes!" sighed Lorrie, who had, in the past, learnt the meaning of those words.

After that there was little more to add, for she knew

all about the paragraphs and from Puyfot she had gained some knowledge of the incidents of Cahusac's visit to Paris. He now added a description of his meeting with de Sarsan and the strange fact that he should have sent him to Puyfot.

"I can account for that," said Lorrie. "It was a bold move to put you off the scent, and he knew that Puyfot was in his power and dared not betray him." She laughed. "When you told me some time ago of Puyfot's tragedy, 'Astoreth,' I wondered if you were not going to mention this, which after all is the only thing about the man that would have given me interest to hear! As a matter of fact, I have made the acquaintance of Monsieur Puyfot myself."

"You know Puyfot?" asked Malcolm. "Why, where in the world could you meet him?"

"At my own house. He has come to London, and 'Astoreth' is at this moment under favourable consideration at the *Athenia*."

"So Puyfot is in London?"

She nodded. "I can give you his address. He is at a hotel near Leicester Square. Has it not struck you that there is a good deal to be learnt from Monsieur Puyfot?"

"Probably everything! If only I could meet him as an ordinary acquaintance, but in my own person it would be useless. That is the difficulty," he gazed at the ground in deep thought. "I saw Fraynes, who is the head of my department to-day. He was kind but he told me plainly that I ought to do something definite

in the way of rebutting these libels," he looked at her with some embarrassment. "As matters stand, Lady Madesson, I cannot proceed against those papers for libel. The loss of the letters I have been speaking of was fatal, without them I could not make good my case.— Besides, frankly there is another difficulty that stands in the way. I can't move because of it. In fact I am powerless until I can produce a knowledge of positive facts. With that to back me, I would act."

"I wish I could help you!"

"Oh, but you can! you have already helped me! Detching was right when he said your head was worth both of ours put together!— I have three months leave and I am going to use it in the way you advise."

"But I have not dared to offer you any advice!"

"I think you have though.— Well, I will keep you informed of what I am doing. And you will set me right when I go wrong, won't you?"

She felt a throb of triumph. He was now begging for the help he had tacitly refused at the beginning.

"I have not much time to spare on my own account, but there is none at all to spare if I am to save Alice," he added. "You remember calling her a special friend of mine long ago? I fenced with the question then, but I may confess to you now that if I had not been held back by a fear of this happening which has happened, I should have tried my luck."

Lorrie stood up. "We must make a good fight of

it for her sake," she said very gently, then turning on him, "I was right when I told you, oh, years ago, that you were part of the feudal system, but you are more, you are worse! For you are fixed in a rigid vice of conventions! You refused happiness for yourself and perhaps for her too, because of an idea — and left her to fall into the hands of such as de Sarsan!"

An expression he could not fathom had sprung into her face.

"What else was possible?" he rejoined, and his face was a revelation to her. "I had faith in right once, I believed that truth was possessed of an inborn power, that it could not be hidden forever, but I was wrong! I may carry a smirched name to my grave and my best hopes lie in self-effacement and obscurity. A gulf is open between us, between Alice and me, I could not ask her to share my life now, as an honourable man I could not!"

Lorrie's glorious face was lit by a glow of indignation. Malcolm, too absorbed in his own line of thought, scarcely noticed it.

"Honour!" she repeated. "While you know yourself to be what you are, and de Sarsan to be what he is, you still call it 'honour' to leave her to be his wife rather than to make her yours! You tune your life to the false key of the world's opinion, not to the only honest or reasonable opinion possible! I have no patience with your spurious ideas of honour!"

He heard her out, his handsome mouth set. As she put the case and with the charm of her personality

kindling the words, all that she said seemed true, tremendously true, but —

"But if I could bring myself to go to her to-day," he said, "how do you suppose Alice would meet me? You know what Wil thinks; what would she say?"

"I cannot tell. She may be hidebound by convention as you are! But if she loves you and if she is worth — anything," Lorrie rejoined with a lovely thrill in her voice, "she could give you only one answer."

Before he could speak, he found himself gazing at the back of a hansom which was carrying her away to Devos Square.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE HOTEL MARAVIGLIA

THE Hotel Maraviglia made no outward show of its wonders. It was situated in a narrow street and turned a peculiarly gloomy frontage to the world. Yet it is only fair to mention that its customers found it much more comfortable than other hostelries of far more promising aspect.

It was owned and conducted by a pallid and very bald Italian, who was well and favourably known in the neighbourhood as Monsieur Zalpini, Monsieur representing to the mind of the man in the street the prefix appropriate to the name of every foreigner whatever his nationality. For twenty years Monsieur Zalpini had run his hotel with the strict economy of an Italian who is amassing a fortune wherewith to return to his country at the earliest possible moment, yet the economy was modified by the eminent good sense with which he recognised the fact that to attract and to retain well-paying clients one must be a little liberal here and there — this point he was in the habit of illustrating by rubbing the tops of his fat, dark fingers together as if sprinkling salt on some desirable *plat*. "*Let the* mule feed, that he may live long and carry

the more," he would say. "It is, in truth, an old adage but of an admirable sagacity."

The management of the Hotel Maraviglia gave Puyfot entire satisfaction. There was no stint of flavour in the food and the absinthe had the aroma of good quality; moreover, there were among the guests persons with whom a man of brains could converse and meet with appreciation. Also it was summer, and even England is sometimes not so accursed in summer! This period of happiness was, indeed, the full summer of his life, but to Puyfot it seemed only the dawning of a yet more brilliant day.

On the evening following Malcolm's last conversation with Lady Madesson, a tall slouching individual with a shabby handbag turned in at the low door, beside which Zalpini sat in a gloomy box, which he called the bureau. An acquaintance who was crowding up the door of the bureau stood aside while business was done.

"A room? But yes, one or two to spare! Monsieur desires a small room of trifling expense?" Zalpini shrugged his stout shoulders. "I fear no! Ah, Monsieur is ready to pay an advance! *Buono!* There may be an apartment on the third floor, who knows?" Zalpini, softened by the sight of gold in his new client's dirty but overwhite hand, hissed sharply through his teeth.

This brought forth from the cavernous passage a waiter of a cheaper racial quality than Italian. He spoke no known language but a polyglot picked up

during the months he had served the guests of many differing nationalities who formed the clientèle of the Hotel Maraviglia.

This youth was understood to say there was a room available and the slouching stranger inscribed his name in a thumbed volume that lay open before Zalpini.

"Alphonse, show Monsieur his apartment."

The waiter shuffled off, followed by the tired figure of the man who had written down his name as Ambrose Finch. The two Italians left in the bureau stared after him; his sandy hair and thick sandy beard were ill-cut and untidy and a general look of defeat and depression hung about him. As he disappeared Zalpini reseated himself.

"English!" he said with his finger on the written name. "But, yes! Ambrose Finch! none but barbarians could conceive of such a name, and no civilised personage could pronounce it! He is what they call 'down on his luck!' hein?" with a grin. The two laughed together with the self-gratulation of the well-to-do.

"He said that he had been recommended to come here. I do not suppose he has often been in such a house," pursued Zalpini. "See you, Bagio, how excellent it is to have a good name? It is no more than to-day a halfpenny, to-morrow a farthing and behold the third day you gather in a shilling!"

"That may be so in your trade," replied Bagio dubiously, "but I am a seller of boots."

Meantime, the subject of their remarks was treading

the grimy stairs not at all in the spirit of satisfaction which Zalpini imagined; the stuffy odours of escaping gas, cooking, and much-breathed air suffocated him. Would any good come of it after all? He looked round with distaste upon the bed and furniture as the door closed upon Alphonse; he felt the positive nausea of a fastidious man who is forced into contact with such surroundings. The next instant he was blaming himself — that he should grumble at anything, anything! when he knew all that Lorrie had gone through on his account — to give him aid. *She* had brought Puyfot to England, she had even asked him to her house and given him the help of her influence and her wealth. She had endured his society and even listened to his confidences. He could never repay her for her splendid unselfishness; if he succeeded his success would be owing to her wit and to her courage, not his own. Detching was right, she was a woman any man might adore — yes! Yet his heart gave no echo to the words, and it was Alice's face with its pleading eyes that haunted him.

As the days passed, Malcolm Cahusac settled down more or less to the rôle he had undertaken. At the outset he spoke little, merely giving out for Zalpini's benefit and because he realised that known facts kill much of the speculation and gossip which gather about any reticent stranger, that he was looking for a clerkship. He was seen to search papers and to answer advertisements in weary profusion. He applied to Zalpini for advice more than once, and that personage

had been heard to remark that the Englishman was "of a good sort" when all was said.

Cahusac became bolder as time went on, and now feeling secure in his new personality he even discussed political events with habitués of the restaurant, which occupied one whole side of the ground floor of the Maraviglia. Puyfot often took part in the talk but he obviously held himself to be somewhat above his company. Yet his tongue being a member that could not resist wagging, he gave his opinions with a good deal of volubility. But though Cahusac sometimes found the discussion veering near the topic in which he felt interest, not one word did Puyfot drop that proved of the slightest value.

At the close of a week, Malcolm began to feel that it was time to report — not progress but his lack of it, besides the prospect of a talk with Detching in a less stuffy atmosphere and the acquisition of a couple of clean shirts to go on with was exhilarating.

He found his friend as red, sardonic, and as apparently unresponsive as ever, yet something intangible about the man warmed Malcolm's heart with a fresh conviction of his friendship.

"No, I have found out nothing!" Malcolm emphasised the last word, and then laughed. "Yet on my honour, after that bath you were good enough to propose, I feel an entirely contented man."

"Pretty near all that a man hath will he give for his physical comfort," remarked Detching. "So you

have gathered no information from Puyfot or anybody else?"

"Not a word! You will have to make that humiliating confession to Lady Madesson. It was very good of her to take the trouble to write those letters from Yorkshire for me, but I don't believe the hotel people have touched my bag. It has a patent lock and I keep it always locked and I'd be sure to notice if they had meddled with it," said Cahusac.

And yet Zalpini had skilfully opened the bag and had been through his letters days before! The Italian found it to his advantage to know as much about his guests as he could conveniently glean. He had slowly perused two notes on cheap paper both dated from a remote village in Yorkshire — he judged they came from a shrewish sister of "dear Ambrose," who complained that no money had yet been sent her, that mother was very ailing, and she hoped Ambrose was not idling and enjoying himself in London, like other young men, and would he send a postal order by the next post. A second letter a couple of days later complained bitterly that he had not taken the trouble to reply to the first, that he must hurry up with the money for she was sick of waiting and she and mother had not tasted meat for a week. A postscript added she knew how careless he was with his money, and Zalpini recalling the gold and copper mixed in Finch's hand on the day of his arrival, shook his head and feared the unpleasant Caroline was not far wrong on this

point. Besides there was an angry little line or two from an acquaintance asking for repayment of the sovereign lent six months ago if it was a day! On the whole Zalpini had concluded that Ambrose Finch was precisely what he represented himself to be, not in the least interesting but *sapristi!* unlucky!

Unconscious of these facts, Cahusac went on:

"I sometimes wish, Detching, you could see me at the Hotel Maraviglia! Zalpini and I are on intimate terms, I can tell you. I do errands for him while I'm waiting for that miserable clerkship, you know. But he says I have no notion of a bargain, so my usefulness is limited to fetching and carrying. By the way that reminds me of something in your line that I came across a couple of days ago. You know that advertising fellow who has an institution at Parrot's Place for curing the world and his wife of every disease under the sun?"

"I have read of him but I think he is hardly in my line," retorted Detching, with some dryness.

Malcolm laughed; it did his friend good to hear him though he knew this more cheery spirit arose from nothing more lasting than the temporary escape from the Hotel Maraviglia.

"At any rate he is so far genuine that he has cured one person. I took a broken potato-parer — I never knew how many extraordinarily clever dodges there are for simplifying kitchen work until now! — round to a French metal worker for mending. That is the kind of job, which, according to Zalpini, suits my abil-

ity. This old man, Jarné by name, told me that he has been for thirty years or so helpless with rheumatism, never left his house and had to give up his regular trade and take to job work such as I brought him. Well, two or three months ago he heard of Parrot's Place and applied there and the treatment appears to have agreed with him, for he is able to walk again fairly well. What do you say to that?"

Detching raised his eyebrows. "What can I say when I have to judge from a jumbled account given by one ignorant person and reported to me by another ignorant person?"

Cahusac threw back his head with a chuckle of boyish enjoyment at getting a rise out of Detching.

"I'll go round again on your account, Detching, and ask for more accurate information. Besides, Jarné is a character."

"I think it might lead to something more definitely useful to your aims if you were to go round and consult Lady Madesson."

"What's the good of bothering her?"

"I never proposed that you should bother her!"

"Oh, well, I'm ashamed of failing to get any forrader with Puyfot," said Cahusac. "By-the-way, any letters for me?"

Detching stretched out an abnormally long arm and fished a bundle from a pigeonhole in his writing-table, and threw it across. He watched Cahusac glance through them and skilfully disguised an uncontrollable grimace when he saw a slight red come up into his

companion's face over a letter that bore a delicate monogram "A. L."

Cahusac did not even finish reading it, but put it back in its envelope and taking no notice of the remaining letters thrust the lot into his pocket. His brief spell of good spirits was over, and it is a regrettable fact that Detching, noticing it, said a good many bad words in the privacy of his own mind. Then he pulled out his watch.

"I'm bound to be at the club to meet a fellow just now, but I shall not be long, so if you can wait for me for a bit—" he said, rising and stretching himself.

"Thanks, yes, that will suit me. I'm supposed to have gone down to Clapham to-day to see about a booking-clerk's place in a butcher's shop, so I have plenty of time!" Cahusac replied with an effort at his recent good spirits.

No sooner had Detching departed than Malcolm took out Alice's letter and read it through slowly and carefully. There was not much in it, only a pitiful reminder of their last meeting, of how stupidly she had let slip the chance of saying the very things she had meant to say; she went on to beg him not to think harshly of her because of what Wil had told him (the poor girl could not bring herself to put the fact of her coming marriage with de Sarsan down in black and white for Malcolm's eyes to read), she did not look for happiness in the future but if she helped Wil, that would be something to live for; and she hoped that Malcolm would not be like her but very, very

happy, she had prayed that he might be so; and though when they met again, they would each have other ties, still she would never alter but remain as long as she lived his sincere and affectionate friend.

It was in truth a letter straight from a sorrowful, simple young heart and calculated to wring the withers of any man to whom it should be addressed. Malcolm sat holding it in his hands, while his eyes ached and burned with the tears that never really come for a man's relief. Dear, gentle and confiding Alice! Sacrificed to the differing but equally selfish aims of those two, Wil and de Sarsan, both of whom she believed truly loved her! For a long time the thought did not occur to him of the answer that he must write and which she would be expecting by every post. When he recollected it, a new perplexity confronted him. Suspecting de Sarsan as he did, was he not justified in sending her some vague warning? Could he forgive himself if he allowed her to take the fatal step of a marriage with such a man? He almost decided that he must write some hint — but in what words could he couch it?

Distracted by doubts of the wisdom of following this course and the possible consequences of not taking it, in the end he snatched up a pen and wrote more tenderly than he was aware, telling her how grateful he was for her goodness in thinking of sending him a letter, and how entirely he understood all that she had done or meant to do, that he knew she lived for others and not for herself, but he begged her not to allow

herself to be hurried into any decided act, and signed himself in the past, in the present and always in the future her faithful friend.

Perhaps if he had had time to read it again, he might have altered its tenour but Detching entered as he placed his name on the notepaper, and there was no opportunity for more.

CHAPTER XXIV

BLINDERS

ALICE's letter had lain for four days in the pigeonhole of Detching's desk before Cahusac received it. During those days, she had grown nervously sensitive of the postman's coming, even though another anxiety pressed heavily upon her.

For after a rash burst of festivity on his own lines, Wil, on the day following the Sheringham party, had been seized with a heart attack, which, considering the state of his health, might lead to serious results. For once Alice had asserted herself and insisted that he should be brought to Park Lane, where she could see that he was properly taken care of.

Mrs. Westaway obstinately opposed such an unwelcome addition to her household and might have succeeded in her opposition had not de Sarsan lent a very decided support to his financée's wishes. He had by no means forgotten the little incident described by Wil of the apparently agitated meeting between Cahusac and Alice which he had interrupted. In fact de Sarsan had half a dozen purposes to serve, each stronger than the one which he put forward — the desire to please Alice. Wil was making heavier demands upon his pocket than he had expected, and the Belgian

thought it was quite time that Wil's family took their turn in the way of maintaining him even for a few weeks. Also with her brother in the house, Alice could be depended on to leave him as seldom as possible, and meanwhile, Wilford would exercise a certain amount of supervision over her. And more important still, the marriage must be hastened. Altogether the arrangement suited de Sarsan exceedingly well, and Mrs. Westaway, to her disgust, found herself entertaining not only Wilford but a tall and capable nurse from the London Hospital, who knew exactly what the sick man needed and saw that he got it.

And so it came about that the letter, written by Cahusac with its underlying note of tenderness and its warning, never reached the girl, who was so eagerly looking for it day after day. Had she received it, she might have gained courage to face the future, for her heart would have been warm with the knowledge that Malcolm understood and forgave. But when instead of the reply she counted on came only silence, she believed him to be angry and changed, she drooped visibly for her spirit seemed broken. She had not believed Malcolm could be so unkind!

A cruel chance had thrown the letter into Wil's hands. Alice was alone with him when a servant brought up the mail for both, and Wil, seeing Malcolm's handwriting slipped the envelope into his pocket unnoticed while his sister was pouring out some medicine.

De Sarsan happened to be in France when this in-

cident occurred, and some days passed before he called at Mrs. Westaway's. June was nearing its close and he was glad to exchange the heated air outside for the coolness of the house. He asked for Miss Lanceley and was taken into the study where she presently joined him. But in the few minutes' interval he had time to glance round upon the room he had cause to remember so well, and to congratulate himself upon the bold move he had made over seven years ago. He had triumphed over Cahusac then, but was not his triumph far greater now? Then he held the man's honour in his hands, now he held both that and the woman he loved! His hatred of Cahusac and his self-complacency found utterance in a laugh.

Alice came in at the moment and glanced at him in surprise.

"You were laughing!" she said. "I thought there must be someone with you."

She was looking very sweet though very fragile in a soft summer gown. He took her hand and placed a fervent kiss upon it.

"I was thinking of my great good fortune and my happiness," he replied with ardour.

There was about him a new air of boldness and possession which terrified Alice. She waited for him to speak again, and he talked glibly for some moments then made many inquiries about Wilford's condition.

"It sounds hopeful for the moment," he observed when she had answered, "but you know that he would be much better if he could always be with you."

"Ah, yes! only of course Aunt Marion would not care to have Wil here very long."

"He cannot remain with you under this roof, Alice, but under mine you could do as you please. Don't start, *ma cherie!* For his sake, if not for mine, we must not wait till September."

She put her hand to her breast with a quick gasp of breath. "But you promised — you promised,— and I can't — I can't!"

"True, I did promise. But Wil was in far better health then. Come, dear, consider him, rather than your trousseau."

"Do you imagine that my trousseau —" she began, but stopped suddenly. What was the use of talking when he knew so well that her trousseau had nothing to do with her reluctance.

"I hope that you are still a woman," he returned with a smile, "although I sometimes fear you are only a saint. See, I have ventured to bring an offering to your shrine to soften your heart towards me!" he laid a jewel case upon her lap.

He watched for the quickened interest, the light in the eyes, with which most women would have received such a gift, but Alice was plainly not moved at all; she did not attempt to touch the case but raised her troubled eyes to him.

"But Wil is much, much better," she faltered.

He shrugged his shoulders. "You have heard what the doctors said," then, knowing the timid nature with which he was dealing he went straight to his

point; his tone was indeed tender but it uttered her doom and she heard him with a sickness of loathing. "We must be married next month, July, say in a fortnight from to-day, and after our honeymoon, you shall have Wil to live with us as soon as you like, sweetheart!" he took both her hands.

She turned away her eyes and shivered.

"Will you not even look at my gift?" he reproached her. "It is a very special gift for a special day," and then, as she made no movement to open the case, he opened it himself and laid a splendid collar of pearls and diamonds in her hands. "It was my mother's," he added in a voice apparently shaken with emotion.

She drew her hands from it with a jerk. The idea that it had once lain close to the sallow throat of this man's mother only further repelled her. Madame de Sarsan had long been dead and Alice had never so much as heard her mentioned before, but she at once endowed her with her son's attributes, and hated to touch the ornament she had worn. Though as a matter of fact the feeling was entirely misplaced, for the collar, now reset, had never been the property of the late Madame de Sarsan, but of a charming Parisienne of position, from whom it had passed by the not unusual channel of blackmail directly into the hands of the Belgian.

Far from resenting her obvious distaste, de Sarsan was conscious of a keen pleasure in his conquest, of a renewed zest of feeling for this aloof and fluttered

girl, whom he was so soon to hold in his arms as his wife.

"Will you not let me see how it becomes you, *ma belle?*" he murmured with unmistakable ardour.

She rose hastily. "This evening — I will wear it this evening. You are coming to dinner, Aunt Marion told me."

"Well, I suppose I must yield! This evening it shall be. But meanwhile your acceptance of my little gift means that July is to see me the most happy man in the world," he tightened his fingers on her wrist and drew her to his side.

"If it must be," said the girl. She looked so young and so piteous that the man was enchanted.

"Yes, it must be," he answered firmly and waited for a few seconds to give his ultimatum due effect. "Surely, now on this joyous day you will permit me to seal our bargain —" he bent towards her.

But Alice in the very desperation of her weakness, had held him to one compact from the first hour of their engagement; he might kiss her hand but she would allow him no other privilege until she became his wife. Her growing repugnance to that future strengthened her now.

"No, no, no!" she shrank away from him; "Will you not see Wilford to-day? He is in my sitting-room upstairs."

"In a fortnight you will not get rid of me so easily!" he laughed amorously. "Yes, I will see Wil."

He followed her from the room and up the staircase. At the first floor she stopped. Overwhelmed by his determination to hasten the marriage, she felt she must have time to collect herself.

"I will leave you to go on alone," she said. "I have to fetch a book for Aunt Marion from the drawing-room."

De Sarsan kissed his hand to her with *empressement* as he mounted the stairs to visit Wilford when a door above opened and a big laugh floated out.

"Good-bye. All right! I'll look in again soon."

The speaker, a soldierly-looking young fellow with a strong rather ugly face, passed de Sarsan with a casual glance. The next moment it was evident that he had caught sight of Alice from the landing below.

"Hullo, Alice! It's good to see you again!"

"Billy! Why, I thought you were in Canada! It is such ages since you went away!"

How different Alice's voice sounded now! thought de Sarsan.

"Two years and more! I feel like Rip Van Winkle when I look in at the Clubs and see the youngsters who have grown up since my day!" Billy's talk drew a faint laugh from the girl.

"You are not much changed!" she said. "No, no! Billy!"

De Sarsan stiffened where he stood listening.

"What? You won't kiss me? Why not? You always used to kiss me when I came home before!" said Billy aggrieved.

"It's different now," faltered Alice. "I am engaged."

"To be married? To whom? Why wasn't I told? To whom?"

"You — you must have met him on the staircase."

De Sarsan clenched his hands for he could hear that Alice was ashamed as she said it, ashamed to own her future husband.

"Good Lord! Not to that bou— I mean foreigner?"

There could be no mistake about Billy's shocked intonation. Alice made no audible reply, but the young man spoke again at once.

"Why, you're fearfully pale, Alice! Come to the light and let me look at you! Wil has been overtiring you — and you want as much care as he does! My word! I'll talk to Aunt Marion!"

With that the speakers must have moved into the further drawing-room for de Sarsan could hear no more than a vague murmur. He opened Wil's door with an angry hand.

"Who's that man I met going down?" he asked brusquely.

Now, although Wil still desired, for his own purposes to play de Sarsan's game, he had long ago ceased to like him, and was maliciously ready to seize upon any chance of annoying him.

"Who? Why, old Blinders, I suppose," he answered without turning his head.

"Ach! A young man, a young man!"

"Well, Blinders is a young man!" said Wil, composedly.

"*Tiens!* It is then a nickname such as you use in your imbecile English society," rasped out de Sarsan.

Wil cocked a furtive eye at his companion. What the dickens had Blinders done to rile de Sarsan so badly? Good old Blinders!

"It is exactly that, a nickname such as we use in our English society and which naturally are not known to —" Wil paused, "outsiders."

De Sarsan choked. He had lived too long in England not to understand the second slang meaning of the word. "Well, who is this Blinders?"

"Speak respectfully, my dear friend! He used to be Billy Linders, and a couple of years ago he took on an A.D.C. job to the Governor-General of Canada, chiefly to be handy for big-game shooting. Now his uncle is dead and Billy has become Lord Lindersmere, the head of the family."

"Whose family?"

"Mine," replied Wil.

"Perhaps he will be so good as to support you then!" snapped out de Sarsan.

"He might, if I put it to him, for he is a first-rate fellow," said Wil thoughtfully. "But it would be likely to upset your apple-cart if he did, you know." He grinned as he glanced at his companion. "Billy's is not one of those rotten thirteen-for-a-penny titles they sport in your country, de Sarsan, but a sound Eng-

lish earldom with money and pedigree and prestige behind it — and don't you forget that!"

"It is not probable that I shall forget as your sound English earl will be my cousin within a fortnight," retorted the Belgian.

"No?" exclaimed Wil incredulously. "Has Alice consented?"

"Of course she has."

"Oh, my! Who's to break the news to Blinders, I wonder! It's an uncommonly lucky thing that people don't often die of joy, isn't it?" said Wil, in high feather at the opportunity of irritating de Sarsan which did not come in his way as often as he could have wished, "or there's no saying what might happen to Blinders!"

Now Wilford had quite intended to make over Cahusac's letter which he had suppressed, to de Sarsan, but the return of Blinders had rather altered the situation. Wilford regarded de Sarsan as stingy and foresaw that it might suit his game to permit Alice to marry Cahusac after all — that is, if Billy could be brought to see that his family had claims upon him and his purse. Anyhow, he determined to keep the letter for the present and act as jumped best with his own interests when time revealed what those interests would be.

"Has Cahusac also come to see you?" enquired de Sarsan, after some conversation.

Wil shook his head. "No. Someone said he'd been fired by the Foreign Office, but he isn't likely to

sit down under it, if there's anything to be cleared up about those nasty rumours in the newspapers. He'll have plenty of time to give to his own affairs now."

De Sarsan looked at him with a sudden sharpness. "What do you know of his affairs? Has he ever spoken of them to you?"

"Good heavens, no! They don't interest me." And upon this the conversation turned to other topics.

So de Sarsan left without the letter, but as luck would have it when Blinders had extracted some of the facts of Wil's financial doings and details of Alice's engagement from Mrs. Westaway, even though it was an expurgated edition of the story, made to suit the lady's own connection with the business, his frame of mind precluded any desire to further intercourse with the invalid.

"But Aunt Marion, you can't make me believe that Alice wants to marry that Belgian?" urged Billy, as he recalled the middle-aged figure of de Sarsan with its filling waistcoat and conspicuous lack of those attributes which he believed such a girl as his young cousin would demand in a husband.

Mrs. Westaway, who still possessed a mass of fair hair and a pretty colour, put on her gentlest and most deprecating air.

"My dear boy," she said to her nephew. "Alice is really incomprehensible. I cannot explain how Wil's money-affairs became so entangled but I assure you if Alice had only listened to reason, they could have been arranged somehow, but she would have her

own way. She chose to take this man's advice and as she was of age, what could one do?"

"But, see here, Aunt, that is quite another business to marrying the fellow! You won't get me to believe she is doing that of her own free will!" Billy was a very persistent person.

Mrs. Westaway shook her graceful blonde head.

"I can only tell you, Billy, that he came here one day and talked to me about it. I was dreadfully upset at the idea, but he appears to have plenty of money and she seemed to have made up her mind to accept him. I am quite as puzzled as you are."

Billy frowned in perplexity. Of course he had no right to interfere — but Alice, of all girls!

"And what has become of Alice's own fortune?" he enquired.

"She made most of it over to Wil."

"I only wish Wil was in a condition to stand such a licking as he deserves!" exclaimed Lord Lindersmere hotly. "I say, is there nothing we can do to put a stop to Alice's making a fool of herself?"

Mrs. Westaway was sympathetic but had no suggestion to offer and when presently Blinders went off discontentedly, she watched him from the window.

"Put a stop to it?" she said to herself. "Not I. No one else would take Wil off our hands. And I won't permit you to spoil that arrangement, my dear boy!"

The upshot was that Wil finding Blinders unaccountably slow in any offer of help, turned back upon de

Sarsan as his only resource, thus Cahusac's intercepted letter passed into the Belgian's hands, who read and promptly burnt it, an act which had a far-reaching influence on more lives than one.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SINS OF "ASTORETH"

THE influence of the day and of the woman lay strong upon Puyfot. Half-reclined in a deep chair he waited in Lady Madesson's drawing-room for her appearance. The hot, languorous summer afternoon with its hushed noises crooned an exquisite song of love and glory in his ears.

Under the pink and white awning of the balcony a forest of flowers level with his eyes recalled to him forgotten days of his childhood when he lay in southern meadows, his sight filled with the delicate waving of bloom and grasses; overhead the burnished sky; and in his bosom a newly-awakened soul. He had believed those exquisite days gone forever, but he had found them again, crowned with a fuller ecstasy, inweaved with love, edged with a delirious happiness. He was stirred, softened, humbled, exalted. The mad mood of this kind was upon him. To-day — yes, today, in that luxurious scented stillness, he would tell her, his queen, his inspiration, that he loved her.

He forgot the fact that however bold were the heights to which his imagination soared when out of her presence the moment he entered it, she held him unalterably to his true position. Towards him she

was a Queen condescending indeed but cold, seeing him not as a man, but as a subject, gifted with a glorious genius but separated from her by unbridgeable distances.

So it was now, but in the future when the world acclaimed him, surely he must rise to her side, or would she stoop to his?

And upstairs Lorrie Madesson on her knees, asked for forgiveness not from heaven only, but from earth. Once Puyfot's admiration would have seemed to her no more than a not unamusing episode, to-day she almost loathed herself for having awakened it. She was well aware that Malcolm if he loved her would rather have died than consented to her interviews with Puyfot, who under cover of quotations from "Astoreth," raved out his love for herself. Further, although Malcolm did not love her, he held her too sacred to permit her the stain of that companionship. Could she ever confess to him that she had stooped to win this vile creature's love, to tamper with such loyalty as still starved in him, to absorb his vain soul in nobler dreams — that she might use him for her own purposes? Detching knew of it all without horror or even objection, and yet, as Lorrie well understood, Detching loved her. Detching was a man who could love a woman not in spite of her faults, but perhaps because of them. Malcolm was far otherwise. She recalled the look upon his face when he spoke of Alice Lanceley. The girl's ignorance of life, her empty experience, even her nebulous affection were in

his eyes the adorable attributes of a saint. And for these very scruples alas! Lorrie loved him.

That was Lorrie's dark hour. But she soared above it, for she resolved, come what might of misunderstanding in consequence of it between her and Malcolm, to carry through her design, as regarded Puyfot, to sacrifice herself, if only she might by any means gain for the man she loved the knowledge that would give him back his career and the joy of life.

She rose from her knees, spent a moment at her glass adding touches of fascination to her appearance, yet could hardly force herself at the last moment to enter the room that held Puyfot.

It may be that he did not hear her enter, for he remained sunk in his armchair. Lorrie moved softly, looking at him, the little human weed whose presence marred the beauty of her flowers.

"M. Puyfot!" He got upon his feet slowly like one dazed. "No, please don't move; it is much too hot for ceremony," she went on, dexterously avoiding his hand. "Sit down. I have good news for you."

Puyfot had reached a chair at no great distance from her by this time.

"Madame," he breathed, "we are then immortal!"

"Not quite yet, but on the way, perhaps;" Lorrie smiled. "'Astoreth' will shortly go into rehearsal both here and in Paris." She went into various details, but he scarcely heard her. As usual, her very presence intoxicated him. When she had ceased, he

was silent for a moment with his eyes fixed upon her. That silence was meant to be the fitting prelude to his great love-scene.

"Madame, I owe you everything!" He hesitated and instead of the word he longed to use, he uttered another. "Gratitude in the breast of men of my race is not a common emotion; it is a passion! I could have offered you that, beautiful lady, and embalmed your name in verse worthy of us both. But for you is reserved a greater destiny."

Lorrie under-read the poetic pomposity. She foresaw what was coming, and, holding down her disgust and repulsion, met the words with a faint smile, that never failed to act as a check upon his attempted protestations.

"We were talking of something more immediately important than my destiny," she said, after a little interval during which he felt an embarrassment he fought against without success, "of 'Astoreth.'"

"To another man, 'Astoreth' might appeal at such a moment as this, but not to me." He rose, making another effort to force her to hear that which he desired to tell her. "The supreme fact of existence to me, even to-day, is that I may kneel to you with immortality in my hands. Upon your head I would place my crown of laurels."

The faint smile deepened at the corners of her mouth.

"Let me remind you that this is a moment of gratitude — of generous impulse," she said.

"You are at all times my inspiration! My —"

"We will talk of this another day," she said with a firmness of tone which jarred upon him and spoilt his eloquence. He secretly deplored the fact that the Anglo-Saxon races are lacking in the dramatic instinct; one of his own country-women would have been in sympathy with the perfection of such a declaration at such a juncture.

Meanwhile, Lorrie and her adorable smile held command of the situation.

"Madame," he said, after a half-sulky pause, "you are cruel to-day."

She shrugged her shoulders gaily. "What does to-day matter if to-morrow gives 'Astoreth' to the world!"

A wild idea sprang into his mind. He understood her now — this magnificent woman whom he loved was jealous of "Astoreth"— of the child of his brain! He smiled at her ecstatically.

"To-day is flesh and blood," he exclaimed with meaning, "and dearer far than to-morrow to me!"

She seized at once upon his fatuous mistake and twisted it to further her own purposes.

"That is beyond belief," she said, in a very low voice. "Men pretend to give all, but withhold much."

Puyfot was fast losing his head. Never before had she so far unbent to him. He rose and stood at her side.

"How can I prove —"

She interrupted him, waving him imperiously back

to his chair. "I cannot speak while you stand there," then added. "You refused me a request I made."

He looked at her with blank astonishment. "But impossible! I could not refuse you any request —"

Lady Madesson shook her head. "You have forgotten my wishes very quickly!"

He was becoming more strongly excited.

"Tell me what you desire. I will withhold nothing. I can keep back nothing from you!"

"Then tell me about Mr. Cahusac's father. I burn with curiosity."

He frowned a little.

"But Cahusac — why of Cahusac and his father?"

"Why? Because I have a woman's inquisitiveness which has no limit and no reason."

His face cleared. Here was a feminine weakness which he understood.

"It is another man's secret, but —" he paused.

"Another man's secret?" she exclaimed with a provocative laugh.

"Honour —" he began.

"Is this a case of honour or dishonour?" she exclaimed reproachfully. "Is it not more important I have asked this favour of you?"

"Pardon. I had forgotten that. But to tell you those things I must go back and speak of my early life."

"And will you not? Long ago you promised to tell me more of your history. Tell me of it now."

"Lady, I will speak openly, for then you will know

me as I am — the slave, the oppressed, the martyr, the hero!"

Puyfot plunged into his story like a man inspired. First he described his boyhood and the days of his early youth, when the world rolled like a panorama before his eyes, when he drank deep of the well of poetry, of first experiences, of hope, of ambition. He told her once more of poverty that held him chained, of his efforts to free himself, of the sudden vision of wealth as placed before him by the secret intelligence agents of Paris. He went on to describe his arrival in chill and misery in London, whither he had been sent by his superiors for the purpose of spying upon another spy, after the good secret service fashion. "It was then that I became a slave!" he concluded violently.

"I was but sixteen years old, Madame, a youth compact of dreams and faiths. Look at me now — see these lines and hollows." He ran his fingers over the outline of his face, while a couple of tears stole down his cheeks into the black ambushment of his little beard. "It was then I first saw Cahusac père. He was pointed out to me by my companion, whom, you understand, I was to aid and watch as occasion required."

"And he had orders to watch you also?"

Puyfot shrugged his shoulders.

"That goes without saying. It is so easy to betray, one must be upon one's guard. By-and-by we received instructions that an important move was con-

templated by the Court of St. James's. Sir Malcolm Cahusac was the personage we were to get in touch with if possible."

"But surely you must have known that a man in his position was not to be tempted! Such things are impossible."

"Generally, yes, but my confederate was as the devil, one who had resolved to rise, who was ready for any risk to attain a high place in his profession. He has succeeded. He is at this moment the head of the most influential Secret Service Bureau in London."

Puyfot wiped the drops which were gathering on his brow.

"We arranged our plans. Cahusac, although a man of the aristocracy and well placed, was, as we had discovered, comparatively poor. The extravagances of his second wife had drawn him into difficulties. She was a woman proud indeed, but vain with a vanity passing description! It was our business to learn these details, you understand. My confederate was empowered to offer him an immense sum for his — co-operation."

"You interest me."

"At the time it happened a lamp was broken and useless close to Stanhope Gate; we fixed upon that spot for our rendezvous. Aye, Madame, there is one thing you others do not see:— the romance of London — it is illimitable! London has no personification — how can you typify her? Some call her Danaë,

ready to give all for golden gain. But London is, rather, a gigantic burrow, none know its windings. It is a lurid blaze of life where innocence burns to death. It is an all-seeing Eye of wickedness flashing beneath the serene forehead of the stars. It is at once a desolate massiveness, a naked desert, and a great furnace of contact blown to white heat by the wind of ambition and lust. It struggles from its vortex to the lipping river full of black mysteries, its grave face taking shadows from the ever hovering angel of death! — London, she is all these and more."

Puyfot in silence, looked for a moment or two between his narrowed lids as though he saw pictured the things he uttered, then speaking in his usual voice he continued:

"On a night that has lived in my memory, my colleague was to bring Sir Malcolm Cahusac to the spot, where our proposal was to be laid before him. I on my part hid among the wet shrubs behind the Park railings. I watched from a point of vantage I knew of. There had been a ball at the Russian Embassy, on leaving which it was arranged that my friend was to intercept and draw away Cahusac. I saw them coming, and slipped back among the bushes and waited. My colleague stopped directly opposite to my hiding-place. Cahusac was speaking.

"'Now, sir, you brought me here to give me what you said was important information. Pray make no delay. If it is important you will no doubt be well paid for it.'— I can hear his scornful voice now!

"My colleague upon that spoke plainly. He offered Cahusac a fortune, believe me, Madame, on the one hand; on the other a threat. Cahusac became angry. He cast back the offer in our teeth. He in his turn threatened. Artistically he was a great figure. Not to yield to the temptation would have been something, but he — he did not feel it to be a temptation!"

"Of course not!" Lorrie said impulsively.

"Of course not!" repeated Puyfot in glib scorn. "That is the puritanical attitude of mind. It is not the result of individual virtue, believe me, Madame, it is only a traditional conceit.

"And now, Madame, I come to the end — I hide nothing from you. I was young, and before me was shining the way to great ambitions, and to 'Astoreth.' She indeed was yet unborn, but I already dreamt of her."

Lady Madesson's face became a mask.

"I stood there and saw a vision, a vision of an ever-mounting road, my future! I saw myself crowned with success, made famous in an hour! That incident which had to do with Sir Malcolm Cahusac was to be the beginning — the beginning you understand —"

"You surely never brought yourself to believe — What do you mean?" whispered Lady Madesson. A chill of horror was upon her.

"Cahusac stood with his back to the railing. He said I know not what of scornful refusal. My colleague spoke of death. The Englishman laughed in contempt. And I — I waited ready at his back."

Puyfot stopped and drew a long breath. He related the story as one who relates a noble adventure.

"My colleague raised his hand." Puyfot's little beard shook with the excitement of recollection. "It was the signal. I struck at Cahusac's back with my knife and as I struck he turned towards me as quick as lightning. Perhaps some rustle of the leaves warned him. The knife with its point in his coat was jerked from my fingers, but my colleague seized it and drove it down and home. The Englishman sank where he stood, the knife up to the handle between his shoulders. He fell first to his knees, then sideways to the ground. The life was in him for a moment or two but he could not call out. He lay there feebly moving — this great man!"

Lorrie felt her throat contract as she listened. This was how Malcolm's father had died, the victim of a double treachery, done to death by those who had hoped hopelessly to tempt him to dishonour. She leant back in her chair with closed eyes, she could not bear to look upon the debased creature who had borne his part in the shedding of noble blood.

Puyfot, it may be, read something of the horror that possessed her.

"Dear lady, like a woman you faint at the tale of a battle —" he began.

"A battle," she repeated in a low concentrated voice. "No, the basest murder!"

Puyfot opened his eyes. "You have misunderstood me, Madame, or I have misunderstood you," he said,

after a brief silence. "I was starving. It was I or he."

The change in his voice roused Lorrie, reminded her that she must stifle her disgust, affect to look leniently upon his crime, or now at the very moment of accomplishment, lose the main fact to which all this story led.

"You have the power of the dramatist," she stammered, "the details became too real as you uttered them. They overcame me."

Puyfot glowed. "Ah, I forgot my powers! Forgive me, Madame, it was cruel to use them unsparingly with you! Yet do not shrink from me! Remember it was not I who was guilty of the fatal thrust, it was not by this hand he died: — yet as I will show you, I have been the one to suffer!" Bitter resentment woke in him again. "That devil, the true assassin, has from that hour to this held me at his mercy. By some infernal trick he constructed a proof that makes it appear that it was I who stabbed Sir Malcolm to death!"

"Perhaps he threatens only."

"Alas, no! Though I do not know what the proof is, I am entirely sure that it exists. For in my misery I have once or twice driven him to the limit. He has no fear of me. By his behaviour then I know that I am but too certainly in his power."

"And after — what happened after — that night?"

"I fled from England. He drove me back to my old life, my old poverty in Paris. I have not risen.

I have sunk — until now! Curse him! Curse him! Curse him!" He stood up shaking his hands to heaven in his fury.

Lady Madesson's white lips moved, and though her words were inaudible, Puyfot translated the sound to his own encouragement.

"He is rich, I am poor! But that fair hand of yours, Madame, may have the force to weight the balance even between us — at last."

Lady Madesson started violently.

"But — but what can I do? I am ignorant even of his name," she forced herself to say.

Puyfot accepted her pallor and her emotion as evidence of a strongly-moved sympathy.

"I will tell you who he is — I will confide in you that traitor's name. It is de Sarsan!"

CHAPTER XXVI

LORRIE MAKES A BARGAIN

LADY MADESSON went to the theatre that evening with a party of people and afterwards sat through supper, but nothing she saw or heard could draw her mind away from the picture of Puyfot raving out his wrongs, his self-pity and his half-insane desires.

When she reached home, feeling she could not hope for sleep, she wrapped a dressing-gown about her, then flung wide the window and sat by it. Rain was falling heavily. There had been a storm away to the north and she could still hear the rumble of the thunder as it grew fainter in the distance. The dismal pattering of the rain made a fit accompaniment for her mood of despondency. Existence was a wearisome puzzle; struggles ending in defeat, effort turned back upon itself, no matter how unselfish her aim, disheartenment had concluded each chapter of her experience throughout her life.

The last, which had opened with her liking for Malcolm Cahusac, was now about to close with her worse than wasted endeavour to aid him in his difficulties. She had degraded herself to act a spy's part and, strangely enough, had never seen the blind end towards which she was travelling until Puyfot's

words, "I confide in you," opened her eyes to the true aspect of her position. In her eagerness as a partisan of Malcolm's she had lost sight of all other considerations, and she now found herself aware of this terrible secret without the power to make use of it! She could not betray Puyfot, not only because she knew him to be in the grasp of de Sarsan, but because having won his trust and his confidence it would be unthinkably base to betray him. She could never have done it.— She saw that now too late, and shivered at her own folly.

The summer dawn came lemon-pale over the house-tops into a clear sky before she threw herself upon her bed, tired of thinking. Malcolm was now become closely enshrined in her love, her heart moved out to him in a flame of pity, she could see him in his loneliness, believing himself too proud to regret the world's esteem, for she could not doubt that as things stood to-day the general verdict would be against him.

She blamed herself for not foreseeing how worse than futile was her endeavour to interfere where Puyfot was concerned. Now, the very fact that she knew so much paralysed her. She lay wide-eyed while the summer daylight turned to gold. She comprehended there was no further room for her in the unveiling of the mystery which might yet spoil the life of the man she loved.

Then in an instant she sprang from the bed and stood aghast and cowering, gazing wildly at her own drawn face in a distant mirror. Her personal per-

plexities, Puyfot, Malcolm himself, were swept from her mind, as she recollected that within a few days Alice Lanceley was to become de Sarsan's wife! The horror of it, knowing what she knew! It must be stopped, yes, at once!

Stung by the thought, she hurried through her toilet in a frenzy, and it was only as she passed across the hall that the clock face brought her to a standstill. Five o'clock! She must wait for hours and hours!

Those hours brought her bitter counsel. Alice could not be permitted to marry de Sarsan, but how was it to be prevented? She might appeal to Mrs. Westaway, but she could scarcely hope to influence that complacent lady when she had no reason to urge, no excuse to offer for what must appear to be a piece of outrageous interference!

She might beg them to postpone the marriage for six months even — just a little breathing time during which surely something would happen, something come to light. But it was not to be supposed that Mrs. Westaway would listen to any such wild request or consent to make the slightest alteration in the present arrangements without very good cause shown. And Lady Madesson could show no cause, could produce no reason, for, even if she repeated the tale Puyfot had told her last evening, de Sarsan was possessed of the power to fasten the guilt upon that wretched man and probably to exonerate himself. She had studied de Sarsan to some purpose and she was sure that he had not waded into such

deep waters without holding in readiness a certain means of escape.

She saw no hope whichever course she chose to pursue. To tell all she knew would merely raise a purposeless scandal, condemn Puyfot and leave de Sarsan free. For unless she could offer sound excuses for her intervention, Mrs. Westaway and the Lanceley clan would simply regard her as mad.

Possibly if she had known anything of Lord Lindersmere and his determined methods, she might have applied to him with success. But he was an unknown quantity to her.

Yet Alice must be saved. Of course the fact that Malcolm was deeply in love with the girl, added to Lorrie's eagerness, but in any case she would for the sake of humanity, for the honour of womanhood, have done everything that was possible to rescue her. But to rid Alice of de Sarsan, meant to pave the way for her marriage with Malcolm. It was this latter thought that ultimately gave to Lorrie the one suggestion that promised any semblance of success. This, in its turn carried her mind back to the question she had asked herself on the evening of the Sheringham's party, when, standing by Malcolm's side, she had felt willing to give up her life for him; there were other sacrifices harder to make, she had thought, but would any one of them be too much?

She was finding the answer now! The only feasible plan would demand such a sacrifice from her, and her whole body and soul revolted. For two days and two

nights she wrestled with herself, waiting and hoping against hope that some way of escape might open, but when the time came she knew that she must make the sacrifice.

The wedding was fixed for Monday, thus the Saturday morning brought home to Lady Madesson a conviction that the evil moment was upon her and must be put off no longer. She sent a telegram at an early hour, to which she received a reply that further discouraged her, a malicious trick of fortune which added enormously to the difficulties she had to face.

Before noon, however, her motor was at the door and whirled her away to 241, Park Lane. The front of the house, gay as it was with window-boxes, seemed to frown angrily upon her; it looked a fateful house, haunted with the shadows of old sorrows.

Mrs. Westaway's carriage was waiting and Alice met Lady Madesson on the doorstep.

"I am sorry my brother is not well enough to go to Devos Square to see you as you asked him to do," Alice said coldly. "He is able to get out every day but not for long, though he is much stronger—"

"That will do, Alice!" Wil suddenly appeared in the hall behind her. "Lady Madesson does not want to discuss all my symptoms. Horrid habit the women in this house have of gossiping about illnesses! Come in here, the library is about the only place one can be sure of finding peace."

He followed Lorrie into the room and closed the door.

"Lord, Lorrie! How ripping you look!"

She was very pale but looking extraordinarily beautiful. She took a chair and gazed silently round the room. Malcolm's story of the events that had passed inside its walls was very fresh in her memory.

"If I had known how ill you were, I might have been tempted to pay you a visit," she said with a slight smile, "though I am not at all sure how Alice would have received me!"

He frowned peevishly. "Alice takes too much upon herself. She replied to your wire this morning without asking me. I wanted to go to you. Perhaps you would have allowed me to lunch with you? It seems a year since I took a meal out of this house! Your rooms are always full of sunshine and happiness. Heaven knows I want a little of both! Alice and Aunt Marion are as cheerful as a brace of mutes."

"Will you lunch with me to-morrow?" said Lorrie. "You look much better than I expected —"

Wilford examined his face at a mirror between the windows. His thin cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright with the excitement of her coming.

"By Jove, I don't look half bad, eh? You have done me good already, Lorrie. You always do!" He would have taken her hand.

"Will you not ask me why I have come?" she said, motioning him to a chair opposite to her.

"I don't care a hang!" he laughed, "so long as it gives me your company."

"It is something very important." The significance of her tone struck him.

"Nothing can be important unless it has to do with myself — or with you."

An exquisite flush rose slowly into her cheeks, her eyes were hidden from his by their long lashes.

Wil stared at her. Was it even distantly possible in spite of the hundred refusals she had given him that she cared for him after all? The bare suspicion that this might be so, took his breath away.

"Lorrie, why did you come? —"

She glanced at him and looked away. Wil stumbled forward.

"Lorrie! You can't mean, Lorrie —" he gasped.

"Come, Wil, you know I hate scenes. Do behave like an ordinary man." Her voice fell cold on his ears.

He sank into an armchair at her side. "How did this splendid thing come about? — Good Heavens! I hope I'm not dreaming!"

"I think you are going a little too fast. I have said nothing yet to make you imagine you *are* dreaming."

"Don't tell me that I am mistaken! Lorrie, you mean that you have changed your mind, that you care for me more than you used to pretend."

She shuddered from head to foot without replying.

"After all is said and done, I'm not such a bad sort of chap, and — and — you might do worse, you know," went on Wil. The divine moment was over

for him, and he was himself again, the same self-conceited Wil she had grown so tired of long ago.

"You are rather jumping to conclusions."

"By Gad, then I'll make the matter certain. Lady Madesson, will you marry me?"

"I don't know," she said. "I may."

"Lorrie, do you love me?" He bent forward to look up into her face with a hint of an accepted lover's complacency.

"No."

The single, crisp word, took him aback.

"No?"

"No." She repeated quietly. "But if I consent to marry you, I will make you a kind and indulgent wife —I won't say a good one because if I really cared for you, I should prevent your making a fool of yourself in the dozen ways you incline to."

"'Pon my word, that's not particularly flattering," he said on a sulky note.

"By no means, but you'll find it satisfactory," Lorrie rejoined with a faint laugh. "Wil, I may be persuaded to marry you, but only on my own conditions," she was drawing the gloves from her hands as she spoke, the well-shaped fine hands that he had so often admired.

"I'm not afraid of conditions. Go on, dear." He stretched out his long legs to listen comfortably.

"You have often boasted to me of your family," she said.

"I have good reason to. You can't better us."

She raised her eyebrows. "You have told me that they were proud, but I find I am quite a lot prouder than they are."

"Tell 'em so." He laughed aloud. "I bet you'd make them sit up!"

"Probably, for in no circumstance whatever will I stoop to become a relative even by marriage of M. de Sarsan."

Wil whistled. "I say, you don't mean that, Lorrie."

"Absolutely!" Her brilliant eyes convinced him.

"But, you know, they are going to be married on Monday," expostulated Wil.

She shrugged her shoulders. "That is not my business: it's yours."

He drew in his legs with a jerk. "But what on earth do you expect me to do?"

"Put a stop to it," she answered.

"My dear good girl, do I understand that you expect me at the eleventh hour to put a stop to Alice's marriage?" he exclaimed.

"Why not? I am going to provide for you — so you don't need de Sarsan any longer. And as for Alice, I'm certain she will be only too delighted to cry off her bargain," said Lorrie casually.

"There are all the hundreds of presents already in the house, and —"

"Stop, Wil! Those are details, we may drop them out. The main point is that you say you care for me and would do anything to make me your wife."

"I swear that is true! But—"

"Very well. You know my condition. You must stop the wedding and make Alice promise never to marry that man. That is all."

Wil groaned. "It's a pretty big order. I don't know how I shall face Aunt Marion!"

Lorrie sighed impatiently and began to replace her gloves. "You must make your choice. Either remain de Sarsan's pensioner for life — or become mine."

"I say, Lorrie! I'll be your husband," he amended.

"You'll be both," she said with a little crooked smile. "As for Mrs. Westaway, why, Wil, I thought you had some courage."

"So I have! I can fight for myself!"

She ceased putting on her gloves to smile at him over her half gloved hand. "How about fighting for me?"

Such a look would have conquered any living man. It gave to Wil the desperate courage he knew he should need before he was through with the family feud ahead of him.

"I'll do it! I swear I will! I won't lose you now, Lorrie!"

Lorrie stood up, the colour had entirely left her face, she realised to what she was pledging herself.

"If you break off the marriage with de Sarsan, I will keep my word," she said and moved to the door, then she turned back. "I don't suppose Alice will be very comfortable in this house when all this is done — you'd better send her to me."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE KNIFE

On this same Saturday, Malcolm Cahusac was still enduring the comforts of the Hotel Maraviglia. Zalpini had developed for him that sincere liking which arises in many men for a fellow being who is uniformly unlucky. But in spite of Malcolm's efforts, Puyfot remained as unapproachable as ever; the little man was completely absorbed in himself and the coming rehearsals of "Astoreth," besides he never could rid himself of a deep-seated distrust of men of British blood.

Thus Malcolm saw the days slipping ruthlessly away, each one bringing nearer the date of Alice's marriage, which was now publicly announced as about to take place on Monday of the next week. And already Saturday was come.

Alice's state of mind could never be written down. Although her will was not strong enough to withstand the combined wishes of those about her, she unfortunately possessed a power of suffering that was intense. Her trouble was like a child's trouble, she grieved without hope, unable to look beyond the present. By degrees her abhorrence of de Sarsan, her wretchedness at passing forever out of Malcolm's

life, her sheer dread of the future, fused into one overmastering feeling,—a devouring fear. One might have thought her unhappiness must have moved any human soul to pity, but with the exception of de Sarsan, those whom it concerned were far too busy with their own aims and affairs to pay her more than the most perfunctory attention. But de Sarsan understood, he fathomed her misery and her terror; he resented the first but rather gloated over the second. The gentle nature of the girl bred in her no idea of resistance, she submitted without a struggle and without complaint.

It may be that some faint hope had been stirred in her by the recorded conversation with Lord Lindersmere, but it died away very soon. Under Mrs. Westaway's adroit management, he was kept at a distance and indeed never so much as had sight of Alice again until the morning of the same Saturday with which this chapter is concerned. Then he saw her crossing the pavement from a fashionable dressmaker's to Mrs. Westaway's carriage. Alice did not see him, but he was shocked at her appearance, not only because she seemed ill and frail but still more because of the driven look in her eyes.

Thus though any such fact was far from Alice's mind, three people in London were in their several ways made greatly unhappy because of her. Malcolm Cahusac and Lord Lindersmere were two of these persons, but the third was the most deeply troubled of them all, for Lorrie knew what Malcolm only sus-

pected, and Lord Lindersmere's worry arose entirely from his suspicion of Alice's disinclination and the generally objectionable personality of the bridegroom.

At this juncture Chance took a hand in the game and opened with a new suit. Cahusac had fulfilled his jesting promise to Detching, to push acquaintance with the whilom patient of Parrot's Place. He met in Jarné a man of concentrated ideas and a terse manner of expression which he found attractive. These things that Jarné knew, he had sifted out to the bone and Cahusac's knowledge of life was enlarged during his visits to the low-browed shop which may still be discovered in an alley not far from Wardour Street.

Zalpini had developed for Finch that liking which often arises for the absolutely unfortunate,— for in spite of many efforts it seemed impossible for the young man to find work — also he did not scruple to make use of him in many ways. On this particular Saturday afternoon, he asked Malcolm to take some damaged knives from the restaurant to Jarné for repairs, and he further hinted that he would be still better pleased if they were brought back by dinner-time.

Malcolm, who saw no more bearable way of putting in the next hour or two, consented.

Jarné was in a silent mood, he looked the knives over with dissatisfaction, but he began work upon them and, after a while, spoke.

"There is a short road to happiness."

"I wish I could find it," said Malcolm, absently.

"It is quite simple. Choose a fad and gratify it."

"Shall I choose to start a racing-stable?" asked Malcolm, with a slight smile.

"Must one squander one's money to obtain happiness?" retorted Jarné, contemptuously.

"It is the general idea."

"Bah! Waste only buys trouble! Mark, I did not say, choose a hobby,— that is a serious affair. But a fad, a little fad, which, see you, gives content. For the true happiness is always cheaply bought, quickly enjoyed and soon forgotten."

"Who would care for a happiness that lasted five minutes and was over?"

"Is there a happiness which endures?" questioned the old man with a cynical lip.

"Yes!" exclaimed Malcolm in a sudden outburst, like a man smitten with a conviction.

"As for me, I have never met with it. I have never even heard of it," said Jarné, "I prefer to speak of that which I know. Happiness is not sown broadcast upon the world; if you chance on the smallest grain, swallow it, you may never find another."

Cahusac agreed, too preoccupied to argue.

"I tell you again," said the other, mollified, "a fad that can be gratified without much cost or trouble gives a man satisfaction — for the moment it may be, yet it is a moment snatched from the tyrannies of fate."

"I wonder if I could raise a fad of the right kind," smiled Cahusac languidly.

"Perhaps not! It depends entirely upon the temperament — on a quality which is sometimes absent though most men possess it. Here, for example, are these knives, more expensive to mend than to throw away, nevertheless Zalpini pays me a trifle if I patch them up instead of dropping them where they should go, on to my scrap heap. He imagines an economy and is happy for a whole evening. See!" Jarné held out the article upon which he was working. "This carving knife has cost him nearly twice its value — but I mend it yet again." He stopped in the middle of a chuckle to stare at his visitor. "What is it? You are ill?"

Cahusac got up and went to the shop door. "Probably the heat — the day is sultry," said he.

He stood for a minute or two looking out into the little street, noisome with its summer odours. In the midst of his thoughts which, in truth, were very far removed from Jarné's discourse, the white-handled knife thrust almost into his face had given him a curious shock. With just such a knife had his father been stabbed to death.

"I am growing morbid," he reflected angrily. "This won't do!"

He went back to his chair and took up the conversation again.

"You have made a study of fads, sir," he said aloud.

"But, yes, they amuse me." Jarné worked on for some time before he resumed. "These knives remind

me of a sufficiently odd case. A gentleman entered one day with a penknife on which he desired to place a secret initial. The job was one of difficulty for the knife was of a delicate and beautiful make. However I suggested a plan. He told me to try it. My eyesight was good then. I succeeded. The initial was concealed by a strip of metal so finely adjusted to its socket, that nothing short of a microscope could detect it. He became a customer — for he had discovered in me a person who had the skill to gratify his fad. He employed me to write words, initials and names upon the most ordinary knives of various kinds — one being precisely such a carver as this which I show you, but almost new and in good condition. What do you think of it?"

"It seems to me the fad of a stupid mind."

"Ah, there you touch the point! We had many talks and I can assure you that he was altogether a man of the world, astute, and of a strong intelligence. Yet he possessed a weakness which appears almost imbecile to us."

"Does he still bring you his little commissions?"

Jarné shook his head. "He ceased to come after six months and it all happened very long ago, a year or two after my paralysis bound me a prisoner — forever as I thought."

"A long imprisonment! It must have been hard to bear," said Cahusac, who, keen as he was to elicit more, knew that he must not show eagerness in a dis-

trict where men had frequently good reason to be chary of imparting personal information.

"Suffered? Ah! Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Jarné excitedly. "For twenty-five years I was a cripple, for quarter of a century I never crossed my doorstep! My customer's talk distracted my mind from my troubles, as yours does. I welcomed him as I welcome you, for that."

Cahusac took a packet of cigarettes, the best that in the character of Finch he dared to smoke, and offered one to Jarné before he asked carelessly.

"Was he an Englishman?"

"No, no, from my own country. He made me insert his name in the handle of the knife that I tell you resembled this one — a beautiful piece of work of which I was proud and which occupied me for two whole days all wasted on an object of so paltry a nature!" He flung the carving knife contemptuously to one side.

Cahusac took it up. "In the handle?" he inquired, turning it in his fingers.

Jarné responded at once to this show of interest. "Yes, just here. A slip of steel shot into a hollow at the back in this manner, with a microscopic spring."

Cahusac put down the knife. "Concealing a microscopic name?"

"No, in good lettering for the name was short, Ulpien Puyfot."

Cahusac's heart jumped. "What a memory for

names you have!" he said at once. "A week rubs them clean from my mind."

"I engraved this one myself, perhaps that fixes it. Though it is true that I forget little since there is little to remember inside my four walls, within which until now I have endured my life."

"Then why not make use of your freedom? Come, dine at Zalpini's — do me the pleasure of dining with me," proposed Cahusac. He had come to know Jarné's thin-skinned nature pretty well.

Jarné glanced at this companion from the corner of his eye. "Pardon, but you are not a rich man."

Cahusac laughed shortly. "No, but I am a very dull one. You will be doing me a favour."

So Jarné of the proud spirit was tempted, for Finch had given him proofs of his liking before now, he had often turned into the dark shop for half-an-hour as if he relished the company he found there. All things considered Jarné felt he could accept the invitation without loss of dignity.

As for Malcolm, after six years of blind seeking, it seemed as if chance had thrust a clue into his hand, he was shaken with impatience until he could bring Jarné within sight and hearing of Puyfot, for, even though time may alter a man's appearance, his voice remains the same and Puyfot's was of an unmistakable quality.

Now since the author of "Astoreth" had begun to believe his star in the ascendant, he had acquired some of the habits pertaining to better fortunes. For ex-

ample, his table at Zalpini's was reserved unless he gave notice that he would dine abroad, and to it he invited such congenial individuals as his mood prompted, to take their meal in his company. Cahusac secured seats for his guest and himself in close proximity to the honoured table and they were already dining when Puyfot came in with a couple of acquaintances and took up his usual position.

Puyfot was in tremendous spirits and at once attracted Jarné's attention. Cahusac watched anxiously for some sign of recognition on the old man's face, but he saw none whatever. Jarné was obviously interested in the brilliant talk of the little pallid wit, but no more.

It appeared that the first rehearsal of "Astoreth" had just taken place, and Puyfot uplifted to a delirious height of joy, talked and laughed wildly and declaimed speech after speech from his play.

Jarné was enraptured. "He has brains, this one!" he exclaimed suddenly in French to Cahusac.

"But you have seen him before and heard him surely," said Cahusac.

"But never! It is an experience, a pleasure for which I thank you, Monsieur," replied Jarné. "I am proud of him, this inspired man of my race!"

A clatter of applause went up from the neighbouring tables as Puyfot concluded the lover's appeal that Malcolm had first heard him recite in very different circumstances. A fat man beside Puyfot filled his glass.

"I call upon you, gentlemen to drink to the success of 'Astoreth,' the work of a great genius. To Ulpien Puyfot!" he roared.

Jarné joined the toast with enormous enthusiasm, then he fell abruptly silent, and turned to his host.

"Ulpien Puyfot?— Why did you invite me to dine with you, Monsieur?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because your companionship pleases me," replied Malcolm. "You must know that since I have so often bored you with mine."

"Ta-ta-ta! But what of Puyfot?" Jarné's bushy eyebrows bristled outwards with his frown.

"I knew he was living in the hotel and it struck me he might turn out to be your old customer and that you would like to see him again."

"He bears the name of my customer it is true, but I can give you my word, Monsieur, I never beheld this personage in my life before to-night," said Jarné sourly.

Here was a check. It seemed hardly possible there could be two Ulpien Puyfots in the world. But Cahusac did not waste more than a thought upon that conjecture. Another explanation at once occurred to him.

"Yet Puyfot is an uncommon name," he said aloud. "I wonder if the Puyfot you knew had," he held out his little finger, "a twisted nail?"

Jarné flashed a quick startled look at him but made no reply.

"I see he had," said Malcolm with a grim laugh.

"Have I denied it? I did not know that Monsieur was a detective," whispered Jarné with concentrated disgust.

Cahusac shook his head. "No, I am not a detective. If you will have the goodness to cast back your mind over the last couple of hours, you will remember that it was you not I who began the subject of Puyfot and the knives."

But Jarné had not passed three decades of his life in a quarter where a ready self-protective instinct against the law is the most common of qualities, without having grown his own share of distrust.

"Yet you also know something of the two Puyfots — there is more in it than you admit."

"I hope before very long to do myself the honour of calling upon you, M. Jarné, and will then give you a full explanation of anything I have said or done this evening," said Cahusac with the ceremoniousness dear to the heart of such men as the one with whom he was speaking.

But Jarné still scowled. He rose with something of dignity.

"In the meanwhile I will thank you for your hospitality and bid you good-evening," he said and limped out of the restaurant.

His way home led past the door of the hotel and he proposed to himself a moment's converse with Zalpini in the bureau, but as he reached the meagre entrance, he glanced back and seeing Malcolm standing out on the pavement and looking after him, he deemed it

wiser to postpone his inquiries. He made his slow way through the hot streets to his dwelling, jaded, irritated and certain that in some manner he had been deceived.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SCOTLAND YARD

WITHIN half an hour Malcolm Cahusac was recounting to Detching all that he had learnt from Jarné.

"It's a queer sort of story," remarked Detching when he had finished. "What do you make of it?"

"I make this. In the first place the knife shown me by Jarné was precisely like that one at Scotland Yard which you and I have seen more than once, and I am pretty sure that we shall find Puyfot's name upon it. Of course the value of Jarné's story all hangs upon that. In the next place we already have every reason to believe that Puyfot was in some manner engaged in my father's assassination. He himself, when I saw him in Paris, boasted to me that he knew more about it and the motives that led up to it than I did. But on the other hand, he was not such a fool as to have used a knife on which his name was engraved for such a purpose, therefore some other man had that done, someone whose policy it was to implicate Puyfot very deeply."

"The individual in fact who took the trouble to personate Puyfot to Jarné?"

Cahusac nodded.

"But wait a moment," objected Detching; "at that very period Puyfot was not only in London but living in the near neighbourhood of Jarné's shop. "Was there not an even chance, a chance which the impersonator must have realised, that Jarné might come across the actual Puyfot and give the whole show away? For Puyfot is not the type that can be hidden under a bushel."

"Well, there might have been a chance of it had Jarné been a man who mingled much with his own sort or frequented the restaurants in that quarter, but Jarné was at the time a cripple who never left his shop, besides being of too sour a disposition to attract casual visitors. He was chosen to do the work for this very reason, I think, it enormously discounted the risks of discovery."

"That's so."

"My father's death was planned beforehand, this engraving of the knife proves premeditation. Puyfot was the tool to be employed; whether he was so employed, we cannot tell. But it is on the other man that I must lay my hand, the principal in the plot, the man who afterwards blackmailed my stepmother."

"You don't think Puyfot —?" began Detching.

"No! He knew nothing of Lady Cahusac's connection with the business. If he had known, he would have twitted me with it the first time I visited him. Of that I am quite sure. He had lost control of himself, and his one desire was to make me feel, to hurt

me if he could. It is the other man, the man behind him that I must reach."

"De Sarsan," interjected Detching.

"Who can say." Malcolm was white to the lips. "But whoever he was he tormented Lady Cahusac into her grave! Poor woman! I'm glad she could never know how she has handicapped me. She left me to face great odds, to fight like a man with one hand tied behind his back. I have hardly dared to make a move lest I should bring out this wretched story about her." He pushed his chair violently back from the table. "But there is no use theorising until we can make sure that the first step is on firm ground."

Although Cahusac was speaking in his usual quiet tone, that one rough movement betrayed the fever of his mind, it was so entirely at variance with his habitual gentleness.

"What do you propose to do?" enquired his friend.

"See the knife. I'm off to Scotland Yard." He rose as he spoke.

Detching scanned him critically from the depths of an armchair. "May one ask if you intend to visit Scotland Yard as Malcolm Cahusac or as Ambrose Finch?"

Malcolm looked down at Finch's shabby attire with a slight laugh. "I had forgotten."

"As Ambrose Finch came into being under this roof, you'll find the kit you left behind in your port-

manteau in there." Detching pointed to the next room.

"Good! I remember. Then with your permission, I'll go and change."

When he reappeared, Detching left his chair.

"You know they are sure to make difficulties about your seeing that knife to-night," he said.

Cahusac frowned, his mind was evidently running ahead of his actions, then he returned to the question in hand.

"Why, it must be done, that's all!" he answered impatiently. "Anyhow — somehow — I don't care how, I'll make them do it. We have not an hour to spare. I'll bring them to reason."

"But look here, Malcolm, won't this lead to just what you have all along wished to avoid — the intervention of the police?"

"I hope not. Not if I can help it. But still this has to be done whatever comes of it." Malcolm dropped his voice. "Don't you know that de Sarsan is to be married the day after to-morrow?"

Without more words, Detching reached for his hat and stick and they set out together. The delays and difficulties of the next hour tried Malcolm to the limit of endurance, but at length he succeeded in impressing upon the official consciousness that important issues hung upon his being permitted to examine the knife then and there. He neither could nor would give them further information at the moment, but he

warned them that if he was denied, justice would be defeated.

The inspector, who was on duty, at last put the knife into his hand, and stood watching the young man as he turned it over and appeared to be measuring the blade. Detching saw his difficulty. If the police once learnt the name hidden in the handle, the arrest of Puyfot must be the immediate result, and that would inevitably throw out whatever course Cahusac had made up his mind to follow. By an adroit inquiry, Detching drew off the attention of the official for a brief moment or two, while Cahusac with the help of an oily rag from his pocket and the blade of his penknife managed to work the spring and read the concealed name. All doubt was at an end, the man who had personated Puyfot was the man who was primarily concerned in Sir Malcolm's assassination.

The click of the spring as the slip of steel returned to its socket brought round the inspector's head with a jerk.

"Found out what you wanted, Mr. Cahusac?" he asked.

"I think I may say I have," replied Malcolm. "I am much obliged to you and you shall hear from me the moment I think it will serve any useful purpose."

"You don't believe in the police, any more than Mr. Sherlock Holmes and all others of his kidney — in books?" remarked the inspector with a smile.

"On the contrary," exclaimed Cahusac, convincingly, "I'd give all I'm worth to be able to put the case into your hands this minute and never have more to say to it. Only I can't! Good night to you."

Detching looked back through the door as he went out. The inspector was weighing the knife in his hand and looking it over. He made some allusion to this as he joined Cahusac.

"I'm not much afraid they'll discover the spring, even I who knew its exact position could hardly find it. You got the Inspector off splendidly, Detching, it just gave me the minute I wanted."

They walked along in silence until they came in sight of Westminster tower.

"What's to be the next move?" inquired Detching.

"Puyfot," said Malcolm and with the word glanced up at the illuminated face of the clock. "It is just about ten now — no use trying to find him yet awhile. But he'll go back to the Hotel Maraviglia in an hour or two."

"Better come to my diggings in the meantime." Suggested the other.

"Thanks, we can't do better."

To Detching's surprise Cahusac was in a talkative mood; in all their long friendship he had never before told his friend so much about himself.

"My mother, who died soon after my birth, came of an old Baltimore family. They are nearly all gone, I alone am left with the exception of an old great uncle, who has promised that I am to inherit his

charming little house and estate about four miles from Baltimore," ran on Malcolm, then an odd look passed over his face. "I tell you what, Detching, if this — business I am on to-night fails, I'll go there and bury myself."

"By the way," said Detching after a silence, "I have often wanted to put a question to you. Do you think it possible that Lady Cahusac was suffering under a delusion and that she only imagined she gave secret diplomatic information to de Sarsan?"

"I wish I could think so, but among her papers, I found one or two that proved beyond doubt that she was unfortunately under no delusion at all. She made it her business to interest herself greatly in all diplomatic transactions, and I am afraid gave the impression that my father had trusted her with his entire confidence, which was far from being the case. He had a deep affection for her — but he knew her too well for that."

"Still, I can't even now understand how she collected such information, for you can judge from your own experience how carefully it is guarded."

"Ah, you did not know her! She was in her way a wonderful woman. In looking back over the days when I was a lad and with her a good deal, I comprehend things that meant nothing to me then. She had extraordinary charm — not the soft charm that makes a man's home happy." Malcolm lingered on the words and Detching knew of whom he was thinking. "But the charm that wins everything in society.

Her mind seemed to catch up and reflect the colour and variety of each man's mood. She had the power to draw confidences, she was always on the alert and she learnt more from a hint or a careless word than you can imagine. I feel certain that many from whom she picked up her knowledge were far enough from realising how much she had cajoled from them."

"I had had some hope that she deluded herself."

"No. Besides, her relations occupied all sorts of positions convenient for her purposes,— her brother, Lord Luxillin, for instance, though he was very wary and very taciturn. And there were others. I have never undervalued the penetration and sagacity of de Sarsan, for he chose the one woman in England who by her qualities and her circumstances was best fitted to carry out his plans. I am almost persuaded that he got rid of my father with a view to blackmailing her in this manner afterwards."

Detching looked sharply at Malcolm who spoke with the quiet deliberation of a man whose mind is made up. "You have some plan, what is it?"

"My plan may not seem very clear to you but it is to me. I am going to face Puyfot with this information about the knife. He may already know of it and that would account for his subservience to de Sarsan. But in any case, it is a strong hold to have upon him and I don't know myself if I can't force him to give me the name of the man who was the prime mover in my father's murder.— Once I have that, I can finish the matter in my own fashion."

CHAPTER XXIX

MIDNIGHT VISITORS

As soon as the management of the *Athenia* began to prepare for the production of his tragedy, Puyfot engaged the single private sitting-room the Hotel Maraviglia boasted, and there studied the English translation of "Astoreth," and altered and retouched the acts as became necessary or as his growing stage-craft prompted. There also he wrote innumerable letters and his contributions for those newspapers with whom his contract had not yet run out. Often he burned the midnight oil.

He was thus employed when late on Saturday night, Cahusac and Detching entered his room without announcement and closed the door behind them.

"I beg you will excuse me for a moment," said Puyfot in French without looking up, and his busy pen scratched on.

The two visitors glanced about them. The room had been furnished from the spoils of a demolished theatre; the chairs old and stained, still showed glories of gilt and crimson plush, the carpet had once been barbaric in its opulence. And in the midst Puyfot bent busily over his table, on which stood a lamp bear-

ing a huge shade of gauzy blue spangled with stars, and beside it a tumbler of dark red carnations.

The men at the door both recognised the blue as a curious tint often worn by Lady Madesson and the flowers were of the kind she most liked, but while Detching half smiled, to Cahusac they brought a feeling of angry shock.

"But seat yourselves, Messieurs," interjected Puyfot politely, he still had no idea who his visitors might be.

When he had finished the sentence, he flung down his pen and peered curiously through the shadowy light at the two men who had remained standing.

"Who are you?" he asked with quick annoyance. "I cannot see." He sprang up and snatching the shade from the lamp, sent a flood of brilliant light through the whole apartment.

"I imagine you recognise me now," said Cahusac, as their eyes met.

Puyfot was a little taken aback but he masked his surprise very well.

"*A la bonheur,* M. Cahusac again!" he exclaimed insolently. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"You owe it to the events of the night of the 9th March, twenty-two years ago."

Puyfot turned away. "Bah! We have discussed this little matter before to no purpose," he retorted.

"But the circumstances have now changed," continued Cahusac with a cold steadiness. "When I saw you in Paris, I could only appeal to your sense of

justice — and as you say to no purpose. But to-night I no longer need to appeal."

Puyfot nodded his head derisively. "Ah! ah!" he cried. "This becomes piquant."

Cahusac continued: "You told me in Paris that you knew the details of my father's death as you know the palm of your own hand."

Puyfot now perceived that the situation, as between himself and Cahusac, had, in some way, entirely changed. He shrugged his shoulders.

"One utters banalities in a moment of — enthusiasm," he returned. "I can recall that I was much amused that you did me the honour to believe me!"

"I do you the honour to believe you still because I happen to have evidence that you spoke the truth — on that occasion."

Puyfot stared from one to the other of his visitors strangely, for a sudden horrid suspicion was twitching at his heart.

"Evidence? It is impossible!" he said with a half-hearted laugh.

"On the contrary I already hold it, and it is evidence that even you cannot gainsay."

"Where — from whom?" asked Puyfot, his black eyes flickering. It is the curse of crafty natures to be ready to doubt all humanity to their own misery, as this man doubted now.

"I don't think it is necessary to tell you," replied Cahusac, little thinking what interpretation his hearer put upon his words.

To the astonishment of the two Englishmen, Puyfot sank back a limp heap into his chair, his sallow, peaked face gone livid like a man who has received a death-blow. He read a significance and colour of his own into Malcolm's reply, and had leaped to the conclusion that Lady Madesson must have betrayed him.

"It can't be true!" he gasped.

"I am here on the strength of it," Malcolm assured him.

This but added conviction to Puyfot's doubt. There were only two persons in the world who could give evidence of his guilt. De Sarsan for his own sake was out of the question — and the other was the woman in whom he had trusted!

He sat dazed and sick under the shock of his imagined disillusionment but even before the others could speak, he had braced himself again to fight for dear life. He saw in a flash that his line of defence must be denial complete and absolute of any confidence given to Lorrie, on whom, moreover, he meant to heap the vilest aspersions that his tongue could frame. His chivalry, alas! was a veneer, only skin-deep. He knew the value of discrediting a witness on any point of life or conduct, however far removed from the question in hand.

"It is necessary to tell me since I am perfectly at a loss to imagine what you have heard," he said, "and from whom you got your information."

"All that is beside the question as you will compre-

hend in a few moments," said Cahusac in the same steady, deliberate manner that of itself chilled Puyfot with apprehensions. "On your own word I have it that the circumstances of my father's murder are intimately known to you; I now hold the next and conclusive link which proves that you were personally connected with the actual crime."

Cahusac paused, his stern grey eyes fixed upon the man opposite, his will bent upon wringing the whole truth from the other's lips.

"My word is as good as that of the man — or woman who accuses me," said Puyfot, contemptuously.

"Is there a woman in the affair?" asked Detching suddenly.

Puyfot turned to him almost with a start. "Why not? There is a woman in very nearly every affair."

Cahusac still watched him narrowly. "Not in this one, however," said he.

Puyfot drew in a sharp breath, the strained expression on his face softened, and he laughed out with a ring of relief in his laugh. She was true after all! Nothing mattered now, he was safe.

"So much the better, we shall be saved complications," he said, and added a ribald remark upon the sex in general.

Again Cahusac waited, he saw that his method of deliberation told upon the other's temperament.

"I hold proof that you stabbed Sir Malcolm with your own hand," he said at last.

Puyfot snapped his finger and thumb. "That for your proof! Since I am innocent, there can be no proof."

"Then who was guilty?"

"Ta-ta-ta!" he scoffed, "you credit me with that knowledge!"

"You boasted to me that you possessed it. Besides, if you are so ignorant as you now choose to assume, from whom did you learn the facts that you have published in *L'Œil* and elsewhere?"

"All the world—"

"You are wasting your breath. I can pick out phrases and items that point to very particular information. A libel action would very quickly fix the fact of your authorship and responsibility."

Puyfot grinned slily. "But you have taken no such action! Why?"

This was precisely the moment that Cahusac had feared, he would now make it certain once and for all if this detestable creature had knowledge of the blackmail levied on Lady Cahusac.

"Do you know why?" he asked with ominous quietness.

"Probably because you are well aware those little paragraphs were not fables, *hé?*" retorted Puyfot.

Cahusac's turn now came to feel a relief no words could fathom. It *was* the other man implicated in the crime who had dealt with Lady Cahusac.

"You are wrong. I delayed because I was not satisfied to win a mere action at law against slander-

ers. I have waited until I could exact full penalty for my father's death."

Puyfot sat down at his table. "Words, my excellent M. Cahusac are not discomposing to me. I understand bluff — but perfectly! I will consider what you say when at long last you see fit to act — to act."

"Are you so impatient to be arrested?" Cahusac turned to the door. "You shall have your wish."

Puyfot bounded to his feet. "But this is monstrous! Am I to be placed in prison on a trumped-up accusation?"

"No!" cried Cahusac, swinging round on him, "no! but because your name is absolutely on the knife that was found in my father's body!"

Puyfot fell back a step. There was nothing vague about this fact that had fallen upon him from the blue. An hour — half-an-hour ago life was full of roseate visions, fame — love — all that man triumphant can demand! A rush of thoughts tossed him. "Astoreth!" Lorrie!

"You lie!" he shouted.

"I have just read your name upon it myself," said Cahusac.

"*Sacredieu!* how easy, how simple that trick you have devised! You — you yourself, have engineered this thing to regain all, to revenge yourself on me."

"The knife has been in the care of the police since it was taken from the wound. It has not left their possession for an instant."

The relentless simplicity and certainty of Cahusac's

talk worked upon Puyfot, but he was quick to perceive the flaw.

"If it is true that my name is on the knife, why was I not arrested, accused long ago?"

"Because it was only discovered to-day. Your name is engraved on a slip of steel that sinks into a socket cut in the handle of the knife, it is very nearly invisible and escaped notice until now."

As he listened a dreadful look fastened itself on Puyfot's face, an ape-like fury distorted his features. Half-strangled with rage, he realised that this explained the threat with which de Sarsan had cowed and compelled him through so many crushing years! And now — now when "Astoreth" the child of his brain, the darling ambition of his dreams, whose being seemed woven from the very fibres of his body, was at length flushing to life, a Galatea long and cruelly frozen by neglect, her author, creator, worshipper was to be doomed not to prison only, but perhaps to the gallows! He was to suffer for de Sarsan's sake! From his youth up he had been ground under de Sarsan's heel, and now at the culminating moment of his life, he was to die, to go into nothingness!

In a flash Puyfot's imagination had conjured up before him the events of that rainy March night; he felt the damp shrubs about him, he smelt the wet earth, the cold drops were streaming upon his face and neck, and yet he was burning with excitement, while he listened to the sharp interchange of talk between Sir

Malcolm and de Sarsan. Carried beyond himself by the conflicting tempest of his feelings, despairing and maddened, he fell back upon his last stand.

"It was not I who drove down the knife! It was not by my hand that he died!"

Malcolm gripped him by the shoulder. "Who drove down the knife?" he shouted.

Under the powerful hand and tone, Puyfot's overwrought nerves gave way. He screamed like a snared rabbit.

"What would you do? Would you kill me?" he shrieked.

"Who was the man, the man who drove down the knife?"

But a revulsion of anger had followed the cold fit with Puyfot. "I will tell you no more! Your father's blood is not on my hands. Is not that enough?"

"No."

"I might mention one of half-a-dozen names, and you," Puyfot pointed a shaking forefinger, "you would be none the wiser."

"You are mistaken. I am able, as it happens, to test the truth of whatever you choose to tell me. I have another witness, a man."

This last sentence had a curious effect upon Puyfot; his black eyes flickered over Malcolm's face with a searching glance.

"How do you know he is not making a fool of you — deceiving you?" he said.

"Because I put his statements to the test and found them trustworthy.— Who was the other man?"

The persistent question stung Puyfot to fresh resentment. He hated Cahusac from every point of the compass, racially, temperamentally, as class hates class, as the weak hate the strong, and above, or rather below these, with that fundamental hatred of man for man which evoked the rhyme of Dr. Fell and is the most deep-laid, the most lasting and the most incurable of all.

"Go and ask your witness — he must know," he replied with an indescribable rancour.

Cahusac turned quickly to the door.

"I will do as you suggest. Come, Detching, we will go to de Sarsan."

With a cry like a wild beast, Puyfot flung himself upon Cahusac and dragged him back into the room.

"He — he — he — de Sarsan! He your witness? But I will not give to him that triumph over me! You shall hear it, the truth —"

Shaking, cursing, blaspheming, even weeping, he poured out the story. To Detching it was a terrific scene, though his calling had inured him to many a strange unveiling of the heart of man. But he belonged to a trade that know most and pity most. He had long ago learnt that in reading from this document, the Book of Revelations of the inner life, one must interpret it by the cryptic code of the Ego, or forever fail to reach its meaning.

He forgot Malcolm as he listened to the eloquence

inherent in the Frenchman's genius, native to his pungent tongue. The whole plot of twenty-two years ago was laid bare, at least as far as Puyfot had knowledge of de Sarsan's designs. If his own part in the last fatal incident was glossed over, described on somewhat differing lines to those followed in Lorrie's drawing-room, it is scarcely to be wondered at.

Cahusac stood, his shoulder against the wall with his face half hidden, while Detching, leaning over the back of a bulky chair, hat and stick in hand, presented the incongruous aspect of a man paying a casual call.

Puyfot moved between his writing-table and a couch. He worked himself to a frenzy as he talked, gesticulating, acting out the scene with a volcanic power. Question and answer, threats met by contempt, it was thrust and ripost as the rapid words fell from his lips, till he stood poised as the murderer might have stood above the fallen man who lay dying at his feet. A second's pause and he flung himself face downwards on the couch and burst into hoarse, hysterical sobbing.

Detching turned away. It was too much. And then he saw that Cahusac was already gone. Softly he too opened the door and stole out.

CHAPTER XXX

THE RECKONING

DETCHING ran quietly down the stairs, and under the glimmer of a turned-down gas-jet caught an impression of Zalpini dozing upon a couch jammed in behind the office stool of the bureau, and so passed into the street.

Loitering on the pavement outside he encountered a man to whom Cahusac had said a word or two when they entered the hotel earlier in the night. Detching thought it safe to accost him.

"Can you tell me which way my friend went?" he asked.

The man made a gesture of the thumb by way of answer and Detching presently overtook Cahusac.

"I couldn't have kept my hands off him if I had remained," said the latter abruptly. "I had heard all I wanted."

"I have no wish to interfere with your arrangements," said Detching, "but it seems only likely that Puyfot will make himself scarce — and you may need him. I don't suppose there is a burrow in London he is not familiar with. Is it wise to —"

"That's all right. The first thing I did after seeing Jarné was to get hold of a private detective to keep

an eye on Puyfot. I spoke to him at the door of the hotel as we went in."

"You are not so much of a fool as I feared," said Detching with a harsh laugh.

The moment was acute and Malcolm felt grateful for the light hand his friend laid upon it. Across the street the tower of a narrow-chested, smoke-blackened church gave out the hour of two on a dismal bell.

"I am going to de Sarsan — I don't care what the hour is! Between Puyfot and Jarné I hold the case complete against him."

"Where does he live?"

"I know. There is a night porter. Let's get on."

They walked the full length of a street in silence, Cahusac striding ahead, and every now and then quickening his pace as his furious thoughts drove him.

"Do you imagine he will refuse to see me?" he questioned angrily after a while. "There is no fear of that! My name will be a danger signal to him," and fell back to brooding.

But in spite of his absorption he kept a keen look-out for a cab. He hailed three at various points, but all were engaged, and each disappointment seemed to work him up to a more acute impatience. But it appeared as if Fate took pleasure in baffling him, for suddenly upon the quiet of the night rose a loud clatter and cries, and round a dark street corner a horse and hansom swung into view, swayed and crashed over.

A hubbub and loud talk mingled with the kicking of the fallen horse and a policeman blew his whistle.

Detching turned towards the crowd of night-prowlers that had materialised from the shadows with the unaccountableness of a conjuror's trick.

"Look here, Detching," Malcolm stopped short. "If you are going to be mixed up in that accident, I'll leave you."

"I must certainly see if it is necessary for me to mix up in that accident," said Detching. "And what do you propose to do?"

"To face de Sarsan! I have waited day and night for this hour for more than seven years, and I swear I won't delay now — not one instant!"

"I've waited too, in my own way," urged Detching, knowing that Cahusac in his present mood would be the better of a witness, "and I feel as if I had a claim on you. You'll wait for me?"

"No, not even for you, Detching." He shook away the other's hand. "I must get on!"

"Go then! It's the first favour I've ever asked of you, and it will be the last."

Detching walked away briskly; persuasion was of no use with a man in Cahusac's state of mind, but he hoped his final words might have some effect, even now.

A full half hour later, Detching having washed his hands under the outpour of a jug of water produced from a friendly house, joined the tall figure which

he had watched as it paced feverishly up and down during the interval.

Not trusting himself to speak, Cahusac hurried on. By this time all the sweetness and the promise and the glory of a summer dawning was in the air. The sparrows were making chattering toilets on the house-eaves and in the dust; upper windows reflected a pale saffron glow from the east; some stood open, hot gusts of wind fluttering their curtains, and in the near distances hung the faint violet mist with which London, the sorceress, veils her face from the gaze of man.

After walking for a mile, they reached a broad street, that lies alongside one of the parks. Cahusac nodded towards a massive pile of flats.

"Here we are. Belvedere Mansions."

A drowsy man in a sleeved waistcoat took them up in a lift floor by floor, stopped it with a jerk, jingled the gates open and preceded them to de Sarsan's hall door. All was every-day and commonplace.

The porter pressed the bell. It sounded with a startling loudness. Detching, who was nearest to the door, gave a sudden rough order.

"Go in, man, go in!" he said, "can't you hear, don't you see? The door is open," and he thrust the fellow before him.

"I don't know as Mounseer will like it. I might be sacked over this!" protested the other in a sulky whisper, yet though Detching was a short man, his hand was not to be gainsaid.

The corridor was dark, but a door flung wide on the left threw a broad wedge of daylight across it. The porter tiptoed to this and looked into the room.

"Well, I'm blowed!"

It had been a richly furnished room, but now it seemed as if a herd of cattle had stampeded through it. Chairs and tables fallen over, curtains torn and trampled down, china, picture frames, silver knick-knacks, cigars, broken glass, matches, all mixed in confusion upon the carpet.

The porter stared round, and suddenly his vacuous features lit up with a grin of delight, such as some natures display at the sight of wanton destruction.

"Mounseer's been 'aving a rare old shindy! My heye! won't the two old ladies downstairs lay a complaint against 'im!"

Detching and Malcolm exchanged a look.

"There's something very wrong here — can't you see that?" said Malcolm turning sharply on the porter. "You don't suppose M. de Sarsan allowed all this damage to be done if he was here to prevent it? My friend and I will stay in the hall while you go through the rooms."

They stood without speaking in the corridor, while the man opened the three other closed doors and made his search.

"He ain't there," he reported as he rejoined them. "'Is bed's been slep' in and 'is clothes is laying about, but nothin's upset."

"Where's his man?"

"'Is valet sleeps out. He'll be along at seven."

"Then we will have another look round the sitting-room."

"All right. There's where the rumpus was," the porter passed in first, but as they followed they heard a loud noise as of a fall, and he dashed out again with a face like dirty chalk, his mouth working.

Seizing him by his arms, Detching and Cahusac forced him back into the room. A screen near the door had been overturned by the man on his entry, and from behind it they were confronted by a dreadful face, its chin upon the floor, that seemed to scowl up at them.

Detching sprang forward.

"The man's been strangled! His body's warm, perhaps we're in time. Heavens above! do you see who it is?"

It was de Sarsan, though Cahusac found it difficult to recognise the suave pale Belgian in the empurpled mask with its swollen features across which an early ray of light suddenly glinted.

"Look here, Cahusac, go and ring up the first doctor you can find. The body's quite warm. The police should be informed. Hurry! The porter will stay with me."

"All right."

Detching glanced up at him. "You need not come back, unless you want to," he added.

Cahusac nodded and turned to go. As he picked his way across the floor, he caught sight of an object

among the litter that shocked him to the point of nausea. He stooped swiftly, furtively and snatched it up, crushing it between his hands, and when he gained the hall, he thrust it into his pocket.

As he emerged from the great portico, the delicious beginnings of a summer day seemed to surge around him. Opposite, in the park the dew still lay heavy upon grass and flowers; far off under a droop of green branches, water moved in glittering ripples where the sun touched it. The fresh breeze of dawn blew in his face. But in the midst of all the gushing beauty of life, the horror he had just beheld fixed his senses. He could not respond to the appeal of earth and sky, while he still shuddered with a remembrance of the fury that had possessed him during the long hours yesterday while he linked up the chain of evidence against de Sarsan and then rushed in search of him with a thirst for vengeance that might well have had a culmination which he dared not now contemplate.

He left nothing undone that should be done. Then he betook himself to Detching's rooms. There at last he plucked out from his pocket the thing he had hidden in Belvedere Mansions. He smoothed its broken edges with one hand on the palm of the other. It was a portrait of Alice, that had been riven from its broken frame while de Sarsan fought for his life. She was as fair, as sweet and as dearly desirable as he always pictured her. He looked long at it, for he had never possessed any likeness of her, but before long the thought recurred of where he had found this one!

That de Sarsan should have owned it seemed desecration, pollution. Lighting a wax taper on the mantelshelf, he held the picture in the flame and watched it curl and shrivel with the fervour of a man offering a sacrifice. The fire seemed to burn from her the contamination of that unthinkable engagement.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE END OF THE CAHUSAC MYSTERY

THROUGH the long, quiet, Sunday forenoon, Malcolm Cahusac sat alone and waited for the return of Detching. But the bells rang out and ceased, the hot silence of the day followed until once again the streets were full of footsteps and voices while the congregations from the churches made their way homewards or to the parks. These sounds of life passed also as the hour of the midday meal approached, and the pavements, hushed and deserted, almost seemed to smoke under the flood of July sunshine, for with every faint breath of wind the dust stirred and rose upon them.

Still Detching delayed, while Malcolm sunk in a chair watched a square of sky, intensely blue and pierced by the shaft of a church tower. At length the door opened.

"Well?" asked Malcolm, sharply.

"De Sarsan? He was dead." Detching helped himself to a long drink, and then turned back to his friend. "We did all we could, but he was dead — quite dead."

"Another London mystery!"

"Well, no." Detching gave him a quick look. "They've nailed the man who did it."

Cahusac turned sharply. "You don't mean —?"

Detching nodded. "Yes, Puyfot."

"The porter said nothing of anyone else having gone up before us this morning."

"No, for it appears that Puyfot passed in with some other people, and while the porter was busy with them in the lift, he slipped up by the stairs. We know that de Sarsan was alone in the flat. He must have got out of bed, put on a dressing-gown, and let Puyfot in."

"How did they fasten it on Puyfot?"

"Oh, your detective, of course. He says that Puyfot left the hotel almost immediately after we had gone, but the delay of the cab-accident gave him the advantage of half-an-hour in reaching Belvedere Mansions. As a matter of fact he could not have been out of the flat more than five minutes when we turned up."

Malcolm shook his head. "There must be some mistake in this business," he said. "You won't make me believe it possible that a weakly creature like Puyfot could — could have any chance against a thickset, strong man like de Sarsan."

"Not in ordinary circumstances — no, but to begin with he was nearly insane with excitement, and his fury against de Sarsan would give him abnormal strength for the time being."

"Still if he had no weapon?"

"Well, he had — a natural weapon. It appears he is an adept at that French art of attack and defence

"Is it really worth anything?"

"It's extraordinarily clever."

"Humph! It was the bubble of his brain anyhow, and to hear him now, you'd think it carried the colours of the rainbow. It was the bursting of that bubble that drove him to kill de Sarsan. He swears de Sarsan balked him before and he blames him for what has happened now.— I don't suppose the *Athenia* management will run to it after all this comes out."

Cahusac got up and stood at the window. The sky was banking with heavy clouds and the glory of the day had passed into a gloom of menace.

"I have a good deal to thank you for, Detching," he said at last in a difficult voice. "I'm not speaking of the past but of the present. You're astonished that I should have a word to say for Puyfot, but every man has a sleeping blood-thirst in him, I imagine. I have — I only knew it last night. But for you I would be where Puyfot is."

He swung round on his heel and the door closed behind him.

So it was that the Cahusac mystery worked its way out at length, into the glare of the police courts and the newspapers. It never reached the dignity of the great Criminal Court of London for before the date of the trial came round, Puyfot had become too dangerous a lunatic to be placed in the dock and tried for his life.

Other law proceedings in the civil courts, however, when Cahusac sued *L'Œil* and the *Gaslamp* for libel,

seemed likely to bring forth some piquant disclosures, for society had not forgotten the plaintiff's unexplained delay in taking action. And immense was the disappointment in certain quarters when all the revelations only tended to establish the high reputation of Sir Malcolm, who it was shown had as truly died for his country as a soldier on the field of battle. Malcolm, the younger, came out with flying colours and substantial damages, and the world drew him back to its heart with a solicitude which he most ungratefully ignored.

"Astoreth," was, as Detching had foreseen, withdrawn for a time, but the lurid power and beauty of the tragedy had made its impression on those who were responsible for its original acceptance at the *Athenia* and within a year the play was again in rehearsal. It was magnificently staged and gloriously acted, so that one of Puyfot's old friends on the Paris press, declared that had the author not already been mad, the joy of beholding such a production would undoubtedly have driven him so.

For the wreck of his hopes for "Astoreth" had indeed destroyed the great, if morbid, brain that created her. Puyfot died in Broadmoor sinking by slow degrees from his early violence to an incurable imbecility.

But although nothing which could be regarded as possessing the smallest real interest transpired about Malcolm Cahusac or his family — since everything redounded to their credit — yet other disclosures

were more racy. Detching's timely hint to the authorities that de Sarsan's papers might be of value to them, had produced its due result, and when, upon the news of the murder getting abroad, two or three persons, none of whom spoke fluent English, appeared in haste at the flat and representing themselves as relatives, preferred claims to the dead man's effects and documents, they were met with a vague but firm refusal. This refusal was unexpected and created a most disproportionate amount of dismay among those whom it concerned. Eventually more than one public office acquired useful knowledge: certain people beat a hurried retreat from British shores, and incidentally odd fragments of information oozing out tickled the ears of scandal-lovers and those others, who write weekly letters to the newspapers and in consequence believe themselves to be the saviours of the Empire.

CHAPTER XXXII

WILFORD'S LAST HAND

THE final disappearance of de Sarsan, his dropping away forever from the complicated orbit of his daily life, was a cause of sincere satisfaction to not a few people, but to one person the news came as a most unwelcome shock. Wilford Lanceley was "like the cat i' the adage," he had delayed to act. Though he knew that his jump must land him ultimately in Lorrie's arms, yet for the moment it would leave him face to face with his aunt Marion, whose vials of wrath he had never been able to bring himself to despise, for they were poured forth from the tip of a caustic tongue.

He had thought out the best line of action, which to a man of his character meant simply the line of least resistance. He decided to let things slide until late on Sunday evening, when he would open his mind to Alice, play the part of the noble and unselfish brother, who, when it came to the point, refused to allow her to sacrifice her happiness by marrying a man whom she did not love. He had so often worked upon his sister's feelings for his own ends, that he was untroubled by the least fear of failure. He would indeed have to overcome her, to him,

incomprehensible scruples as to the honesty of breaking her word to de Sarsan; he knew that she would cling to the argument that she had promised to be his wife on certain conditions, some of which de Sarsan had actually fulfilled, such as financing Wil from the date of their engagement up to the present, but Wil had rehearsed a touching scene of repentant love and tenderness and believed that his very affection, added to dislike of de Sarsan, would sweep her off her feet. Then he would carry her away to Lorrie's and leave the household at 241 to discover the absence of the bride in any manner or at any hour that Fate should determine.

This plan promising an easy success, led him to pack his suit case while Mrs. Westaway attended church on that same Sunday morning. This done, he strolled out to the club for a drink, as his aunt's hospitality provided stimulants at meal times only. He sauntered along the pavement dreaming blissfully of Lorrie, for so long as by any action of his own he prevented the marriage, she had bound herself to become his wife. The carrying off of Alice was as good a scheme as any other, for no one would know where she had taken refuge, moreover it must be acknowledged that in his forecast of the inevitable future encounter with his aunt, Lorrie, and not himself, appeared as the protagonist!

Perfectly satisfied with the outlook, he strolled into the vestibule of the club and lingered for a moment to read a notice on the board. Just then a

husky voice reached his ears with tidings that struck him cold.

Two men were standing together by the glass doors.

"Bludgeoned to death or somethin' of that kind," one was saying. "Goin' to be married to-morrow, too. Shockin' affair! Though he was a queer lot as well as a bit of an outsider, they tell me. Forget his name."

"You don't mean de Sarsan!" exclaimed the other.

"You've got it!"

Wil stayed for no more but fled down the steps into the street, where he jumped into a waiting hansom and bade the man "drive like blazes to Devos Square," for he felt that now or never he must make good his claim to Lorrie. She was out when he arrived, but had left orders that if he called he was to be asked to come in and wait.

He was shown to the drawing-room, about which he walked, noting its pleasant furnishings with the new interest of the prospective owner. Next he rang the bell and was gratified to find that Lorrie was free from the vicious habit of Mrs. Westaway, who kept all alcohol under strict lock and key.

By persistent use of the whisky bottle and the syphon, he soon began to feel he could lay his cause before Lorrie with good assurance and plausibility.

It was some time before she came. She entered the room very quietly and her face was unusually pale, but Wil was beyond noticing details. She gave

him no greeting but plunged at once into the subject.

"What have you come to tell me?"

He crossed eagerly to meet her. "The wedding is off — the wedding with de Sarsan is off for good and all," he said, as if expecting her to praise him.

She looked round. "Then where is Alice?"

Wil knitted his brows. He wasn't thinking as clearly as he could have wished — that last drink perhaps. "I'll bring her round by and by," he returned.

She glanced from him to the tray on the table. "Have you nothing to say about how it happened? You are not generally so reticent."

He realised that he was not in a state to concoct a good story, even if it had been safe to do so, therefore he fenced the question.

"Look here, Lorrie! The past is dead and gone and for myself I want to think of nothing but our future — yours and mine, darling!" He took her hands as if he would have drawn her close. "De Sarsan will never marry Alice, that is quite settled. It was the sole condition you made when you consented to accept me! He shall never be in any way connected with us, I promise you."

But she withdrew her hands coldly. "No, that was not by any means the condition I made. I said that if you personally broke off the marriage with de Sarsan, I would marry you. Did you break it off?"

"Oh, Lord! am I to have nothing but that busi-

ness dinned into me all day? Can't you see I'm sick of it? Dear, what do you want me to tell you?" Wil asked reproachfully. "I tell you it is off, isn't that enough? And on my word as this is the very start of our engagement, you might let me sling everything unpleasant behind me and give me a good time."

Lady Madesson stood tall and stately before him. "Wil, what did Mrs. Westaway say?"

Wil sat down on a chair and rubbed his hands through his hair in growing irritation and nervousness. If he could only get her to give him a promise to marry him before she heard of de Sarsan's murder! Once she knew that she might just possibly make a guess at the fact that his own part in stopping the marriage had been one of masterly inactivity.

"Oh, you don't know her tongue! What do you suppose she was likely to say? — and I did it all for you!" he retorted crossly. Then, "Can't you give in for once, Lorrie, and be good to me?" He looked up at her. "Don't you love me a little bit, darling?"

She met his eyes, coaxing and roguish as a boy's, but no answering smile touched her face. "No, Wil, you must know that."

He sprang up. "Lorrie! Then why —"

"For Alice's sake," she replied. "I could not stand by —"

"But —" He began flabbergasted.

"I had to drive you to stop that marriage, there was no other way."

"That's plain speaking, but — I don't care why you did it!" he exclaimed, conquering his annoyance, "so long as I get you! Lorrie, say you'll marry me, promise you'll marry me."

He urged her with look and voice and every persuasive art he was master of, for through all his ardent wooing he never forgot that to gain her consent was a matter of the last importance: since de Sarsan was dead there was no one left to frank his future way through life unless Lorrie could be induced to undertake the office.

"No, Wil, no! I must first be sure that you have earned the right to my promise."

"Lorrie, marry me!" he entreated, but she was dead to the appeal of the winning boyish aspect that once might have moved her a little.

The door opened and the servant stood aside. "Colonel Detching," she announced.

The newcomer's keen red-brown eyes took in the scene, as he advanced to shake hands with Lady Madesson. She turned to him impulsively.

"Wilford has just brought me the news that the marriage between his sister and M. de Sarsan is broken off."

"Yes. I suppose he has told you what's happened. I came round on the same errand."

"You? How did you know?" she asked in surprise.

"I was about the first man to see his dead body."

She fell back a step. "Dead? M. de Sarsan dead? No! I hadn't heard."

"He was murdered early this morning.— But you knew, Lanceley? I saw you in the club when Tom Parish and Bowles were talking of it."

"No! I swear I hadn't heard a word of it!" said Wil explosively.

Lorrie's grave look rested on his face. "I'm glad to see, Wil, you still tell a falsehood very badly. I think I understand why you could recollect no details. We need never discuss that subject again." She gave him her hand and dismissed him coldly.

He stood in hesitation. "Don't think you've done with me yet, my lady," he blustered and the door closed behind him.

Detching turned to her. "There is something here I don't comprehend. Why has he been worrying you?"

"My own fault," she said briefly. "But tell me of de Sarsan and does Malcolm know?"

Long and intimately they talked, intimately as never before and Detching understood even more clearly the deep and generous soul of the woman he loved. For she was now free to tell him of Puyfot's dreadful confession to her in that very room and how the knowledge of de Sarsan's past had driven her half distracted before she conceived and acted upon the idea of offering to marry Wil to avert the greater catastrophe of Alice's marriage.

"Where is Mr. Cahusac?" she said after a time. "Is he coming to see me?"

"Yes," said Detching gloomily. "He's hopeless. I don't know what to make of him."

She questioned him with her eyes.

"He says he has talked it over with you before—about Alice Lanceley, I mean," he went on. "He's going to wait a while for decency's sake and then ask her to marry him."

"Of course he will," she said very gently. "He has cared for her ever since they were children. He told me about it."

"He may be a fool but he is worth better than Alice Lanceley."

"You are wrong. Alice gave up her fortune to Wil and would have given herself too. What woman could make a more splendid sacrifice?"

"That sounds right enough, but there are other facts that must be considered if you wish to judge fairly. I don't believe she suffered in the giving as a stronger character, you, for instance, would suffer. A girl of that nature asks less of life, understands less of life and is content with less in life than — you."

She put out her hand to him, her lovely face paled, her smile was a little tremulous.

"You are a staunch friend," she said.

For once in his existence Detching lost control of himself.

"Must I always be a friend?" he asked, huskily.

"I hope always."

"Friendship is a poor name for — for what I want to offer you," he went on with a crooked smile.

She left her soft hand in his but the frank touch of her fingers presaged her answer. "I honestly tell you that I wish with all my heart I could take what you want to offer. But I can't." A burning blush crept over her pallor and she turned her head away. "I think you know why."

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN ALL LOYALTY

On the day following de Sarsan's death and flying from what she called "the unfortunate disclosures" which followed, Mrs. Westaway took refuge in a little country house, which she possessed on a rather lonely part of the Sussex Downs. She carried off Alice with her but left Wil most unhappily situated in town. With him the inevitable happened. He was obliged to apply to Lord Lindersmere for help and that exceptionally clear-headed young man arranged his affairs on a basis of frugality that simply disgusted Wilford, who complained to any who would listen that he had lost all faith in human nature.

Malcolm failed to see Lorrie Madesson before she vanished on a prolonged yachting trip, and he then went north to his place in Northumberland. Detching had gone off without warning on some vague business of his own, leaving a gruff and uncertain hint that he might join Malcolm later on.

Malcolm spent his days in the saddle and during lonely rides by the sea or over the moors, many things became clear to him that had been hidden from his mind before. The keynote had been struck on the Sunday morning that he watched Alice's portrait

blacken into dust in the flame of the taper, while he waited for Detching.

At the beginning his anger had burnt hotly against Mrs. Westaway no less than against Wilford. He knew her for the selfish, rather callous woman she was and his thoughts moved pitifully about Alice, who had yielded to that which was most repugnant to her because of her affection for Wil. Then by one of those sudden turns of the wind of the spirit of man, which bloweth where it listeth, his wrath turned upon himself and his own doings scorched his conscience. For the first time he saw that it was he, Malcolm Cahusac, who had in reality sacrificed her; while pluming himself upon the purity and unselfishness of his love, he had given her up to misery for a scruple of convention. He felt that he, of all those who drove her so cruelly to accept de Sarsan, had been the most to blame!

The thought was intolerable but Malcolm was too honest not to acknowledge its fundamental truth. He had had the power to save her from tears and from that keenest of all sorrows — to find the one whom she loved and trusted fail her in her need! He read now with an aching heart the meaning of her innocent appeal in Devos Square. "But oh, Malcolm, don't you think that happiness is worth more than all the other things? Nothing matters so long as we are with those we love! And yet we all seem to be struggling for money and things that don't make us happy. Is it worth while to give up so much

for so little?" All her simple reasoning came back to torment him. And he had withstood her — for what? A far-fetched scruple of honour.

Still further back at Fetterings he recalled how she had offered him her friendship — not a friendship for joyous days like the ordinary friendships of the world, but a sympathy with which each might cheer the other when life took on its sadder colours. And her last letter, the letter he had received in Detching's rooms, in which she prayed him never to misunderstand her, in which she wrote that she looked for no happiness for herself but that if she helped others that would make her happy, and that she would pray for his happiness and would ever be as long as she lived his affectionate friend.

And he in his obtuseness, in his cruel folly had been as a man blind and deaf! His heart was wrung with a poignancy of remorse and self-accusation. And he vowed that he would yet make up to her for those long dark days by such love and worship, such tenderness and service as had never yet been devoted to a beloved woman.

Even now he laid restrictions upon himself. He would not write again, for his last hasty letter from Detching's rooms could leave her no faintest doubt of his lasting affection, but he would go to her on the very earliest day that he could dare to do so, and claim her for his own.

So the summer wore on and at intervals he wondered what Lorrie was doing, and wished not seldom

that she was within reach, for her companionship had become one of the acknowledged pleasures of his life. She must be Alice's friend as well as his—but of what use is it to record these futile imaginings?

By the end of six weeks, however, he felt he could wait no longer and on a grey day of driving rain in the north he journeyed to London, to find that city languishing under a long spell of drought. Next morning he started early and leaving the train at a small beflowered station, he took his way by a footpath over the swelling shoulders and turfy hollows of the Downs. A breeze cool from the sea tempered the heat and indeed the day was yet young, for before 11 o'clock he was already ringing at Mrs. Westaway's gate.

He asked for Miss Lanceley and the youth who opened the door ushered him into a shadowy room that seemed full of a pleasant coolness. At first his eyes, still blind from the outside glare discerned nothing, then there was the quiet swish of a dress and he saw Alice standing at the door. He went towards her quickly.

"Alice!"

But she drew back from him with a look he could not fathom and then left the room.

"How are you, Malcolm?" said a voice behind him.

Cahusac wheeled round. "Oh, it's you, Blinders. What's wrong with Alice?"

"Nothing that I know of," said Blinders. "Come out and have a cigarette."

"I came to see Alice," said Malcolm with a gleam in his face that did not pass unnoticed by the other. "Will you ask her to see me? I can wait as long as she likes."

"Very well."

"There is no good beating about the bush, Billy; you know what I've come for."

"I daresay I do." But Blinders remained standing by the window.

Cahusac waited for a bare minute — he was no longer a patient lover — before he spoke again. "I say, here, get a move on!"

Lindersmere turned like a man who has made up his mind. "All right. But I'd like to have a word or two with you first."

"Are you on as heavy father in this piece?" laughed Malcolm. "Or do you disapprove of me?"

"Not so much as I might of a good many other fellows," replied Blinders rather enigmatically. "But as you said yourself there's no good beating about the bush and I may as well tell you to begin with that Alice engaged herself to me ten days ago."

Malcolm went white under his tan, and stared at Lindersmere with eyes gone suddenly haggard. "I don't believe it," he said in a queer whisper.

The blow was so totally unexpected and crushing!

"Clean knocked him out!" thought Lindersmere

and turned his back to give the other time to recover himself.

"Look here, Lindersmere," said Malcolm slowly, "tell me at least one thing. Did Alice engage herself to you of — her own free will? Stop! Don't be angry. She was hard driven before — how can I tell?"

Lindersmere flung up his head. "I thought you knew me better than that!"

And indeed even Malcolm could not help believing in the strong honest face.

"I congratulate you," he said rather lamely, after a pause, but the next words gathered force. "You are a lucky man."

"I know it."

And stricken as Malcolm was he liked the manner and tone of that short sentence. He turned as if to go, then looked round. "Will you tell her from me that I —"

"Not yet," said Blinders sharply. "I believe you're a straight man. I know I am, so I have more to say to you. Sit down."

A bee buzzed in the silence and then Blinders went on with characteristic directness. "Alice has told me about you and — her feeling for you. She has not hidden how much she has liked you — as long as she can remember, she says. You see I'm going to be plain with you. It looks as if I had stolen a march upon you. I haven't! It was Alice herself who seems to have changed her mind."

"I have always cared for her and I thought she knew it," said Malcolm wretchedly.

"Well, she did," admitted Lindersmere. "But there was talk of your marrying someone else, you know."

Malcolm shook his head. Such a flagrant improbability did not seem to require even so much as the denial of speech.

"Oh, well," said the other evidently accepting the denial, "I don't believe it was that that altered Alice. Do you remember the last letter she wrote you? She alluded to her approaching marriage with — you know who. Poor little girl! And why the devil didn't you answer it," he ended savagely.

His ingenuous anger might have raised a smile had it not expressed as nothing else could have done, the single-heartedness of his affection.

Malcolm started. "I did answer it!"

"Are you sure?"

"Is a man likely to make a mistake of that kind?" retorted Malcolm hotly. "I sent it to Park Lane. Alice was there with Mrs. Westaway and Wil had been ill and was there too."

Blinders brought his fist down upon his knee. "Wil! I'll take my oath it was Wil! Oh, yes! He's quite capable of intercepting a letter. You don't understand how matters stood. Alice had insisted upon giving up her fortune to Wil's creditors, and that — man," it seemed impossible for Lindersmere to bring himself to so much as name de Sar-

san, "undertook to settle everything. He bought Wil's debts, after setting about that Alice had refused to be answerable for them, and got them for about a quarter of the amount. He cleared quite a nice sum by it. Next he provided for Wil and promised to do so as long as he lived on condition — oh, hang it, you can guess the rest."

Malcolm said nothing; what could he say, he who had stood aside and permitted Alice to be deceived and bullied and brought to the verge of such shame as must have been hers had she been de Sarsan's widow to-day?

"Thank goodness, we're rid of Wil now," continued Blinders. "I put him so to speak on bread and water, and what do you think he's done? Got married! Married yesterday to old Mrs. Schelmerheim," he laughed shortly. "He thinks he's going to be in clover, but she'll curb him right enough. I've heard about her."

But Malcolm cared nothing for Wil's fortunes. Alice! Alice! was the cry in his heart. Before he could formulate the idea that was moving within him, Lindersmere had taken up his speech again.

"I've been expecting you'd turn up sooner or later, you know, and so I've had my plan cut and dried and waiting. If I found out you did reply to her letter, I made up my mind to give you a chance."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Malcolm.

"This. If after I have finished talking to you, you still wish to see Alice and tell her your version of the

affair, why, you're welcome to do so. I won't stand in your way. If in the end she chooses you, you shall have her. For she is going to get all the happiness out of the future that it's in my power to give her. That's the root of everything — her greatest happiness. Remember that."

"Go on, man!"

"If you had not happened to be what you are, I'd never propose this thing." Lindersmere leant forward and said solemnly, "I am engaged to Alice and you may take my word of honour for it, she is absolutely happy in the engagement. Now — I'm better suited to her than you are."

"Why?" shot out Malcolm.

"No, I'm not a better man, perhaps not so good a fellow as you are, I can't pretend to judge of that. But I do know that I am a cheerful jolly sort of beggar who's never had a serious worry in his life, until I found Alice was going to marry somebody else. Fact! I did not realise she would grow up while I was out in Canada. She's had a rotten time of it since she left school between Aunt Marion and Wil, and she is inclined to take a melancholy view of existence. That's where I come in."

"But —"

"No! whatever else you may be you're not in the same week with me there. You've had your hard knocks and you show 'em. See? You'd make rather a solemn sort of couple on the whole — not your fault a bit but there it is. Now in three months I

bet you Alice, as my wife, would be as ready for a good laugh and a good time as any woman in England!"

Malcolm studied the carpet. He felt that there was a disagreeable amount of probability about this view.

"But if she cared for me — the most?" he said at last.

For the first time Lindersmere looked embarrassed. "Look here, Malcolm, we both care for her above the average. I think we've both proved it, so it may be you will not misunderstand what I say. She is — well the dearest thing on earth to both of us, but don't we both know in the bottom of our hearts that she *is* very gentle, very pliable. Now, here's the point.— I have the temperament to make her happy, that's the long and short of it. Alice is engaged to me. She is happy and content now, I'm certain I'm fitted to make her happy in the future. But if you believe that you can make her happier than I can, then explain about the letter and take your chance. If not, let it alone."

The bee, now imprisoned behind the glass door, buzzed and beat audibly against the panes, while Lindersmere, hardening himself to face either fortune, waited for Malcolm's decision. A clock somewhere in the house beat out twelve silvery chimes before the latter stood up.

"I can't decide in five minutes on this matter — I must have time. I'll write," and without any leave-taking he walked out across the garden and returned

to town. There he remained for two days, a wretched two days, in the course of which he was at last driven to accept the truth of Blinders' contention. Alice would be quite as happy, probably a good deal happier, with Lindersmere. Then he wrote a letter.

"Perhaps you are right. I take it on your word of honour that she is now absolutely happy. Since that is so, I will not disturb her happiness. God bless her.

"M. C."

CHAPTER XXXIV

"WHY DID YOU NOT COME TO ME?"

It was a roaring spring day of brilliant sunshine. The east wind drove in the tide which was blue as the sky above it and laced with tossing foam. The cottage stood high on a sandy cliff in the very teeth of the gale that screamed about its eaves.

It was nearly two years since the men seated at the broad window had met together. Lunch was over and they lit their pipes with a pleasant sense of regained companionship.

"What, in the name of all that's reasonable have you been doing with yourself for these years?" Cahusac was saying.

"Scarcely two," corrected Detching, holding a match to his pipe. "I wanted change of air and scene and I had it calling upon people I know."

"Your friends seem to live in every quarter of the globe then!"

"Yes, they're rather scattered," admitted Detching. "And you?"

"The same old round," replied Malcolm, discontentedly. "But it is good to see you again. But why have you buried yourself here on the east coast?"

Detching manipulated his pipe-bowl with his little

finger. "I thought it was a good idea. Wholesome air and a nice place to ask a friend to."

Malcolm frowned. "I daresay," he said absently. "Did your travels by any chance take you to the States?"

"You mean to Boston, I suppose," said Detching with bluntness. "Yes, and I saw Lady Madesson. I was there a good while."

"And she's been there a good while too! Why, she's not set foot in England since she went on that yachting trip the year de Sarsan was murdered. I've never seen her since."

"So I understand. Yet I've heard there are quite a few good passenger steamers now plying between the States and England."

"You mean — I know what you mean."

"I flatter myself I'm never obscure," retorted Detching. "By the way how's Lady Lindersmere?"

Malcolm's face lightened, his fair moustache did not hide the whimsical turn of his smile. "Splendid! Happy as the day is long. She's got a baby now, an angelic object. You should see her."

"Do you often see her?"

"Constantly. Blinder's place marches with mine in Northumberland."

"So that's turned out well?"

Malcolm laughed in amused remembrance. "By Jove, yes! She adores Blinders and considers the rest of us very small potatoes indeed, I can tell you!"

"You don't seem very sore about it."

Malcolm glanced across with a quick frank look with which Detching was not familiar, though Lorrie Madesson would have recognised it as his normal expression in the days when she crossed the Atlantic with him and before Lady Cahusac had laid on his shoulders the burden of his manhood.

"Well, do you know I believe I am a bit sore in the bottom of my heart; it's how we men are made, I take it! But I'm glad now all the same. Though I still think her the sweetest soul of woman God ever made."

Detching looked long at the yeasty tide frothing far below at the foot of the cliff. "Do you still —" he began, at last.

Malcolm laughed, a short, odd laugh and glanced at his friend, who appeared, however, absorbed in watching the foaming water.

"You bring your questions pretty close home, Detching! But I may as well confess how it stands with me. The Alice Lanceley that was so much to me in the old days will always have her own place in my — thoughts. Nothing can alter that. But she is a vision, something apart from daily life, and — it is hard to say it even to you — from the first, I have somehow failed to identify her personality with the charming neighbour I now meet and address as Lady Lindersmere."

Detching knocked out his pipe thoughtfully and began to fill it again before he spoke. "Oh, it's a happier condition to be your own man again. Don't be

in a hurry to find someone else to adore. You're better off as you are."

Malcolm looked more keenly at his companion's half-averted face. "You were a long while in Boston, you say. Have you nothing to show for it?"

"I did not ask Lady Madesson to marry me — if you mean that."

"Why not?" asked Cahusac uneasily.

"Because I had already asked her in London at the time when de Sarsan was killed. I'm not such a fool as not to recognise when a woman means 'no.' All the same I'd sell my soul to save her a moment's heartache, and she is well aware of that, too. But it's no good." Detching paused. "I've been a scene-shifter all my life," he continued, dwelling on his own grievances in a manner that in Cahusac's experience, was very foreign to his character, "I've not been in the play, but I've had a great deal to do with other people's dramas, with other people's lives, but never a direct interest of my own — until I met her. Now that is over and done with forever, she left me no vestige of a doubt or for the matter of that — of hope. I am not the man."

A long silence fell between them and it was Cahusac who presently spoke again.

"Lorrie is a wonderful woman!" he said in a tone that woke Detching from his reverie, though he made no sign. "Who in the world was ever like her? I owe her everything! Without her help and kindness I should be now as I was then, a broken man. How

brilliantly she led us through all that maze of conjecture and mystification. She suggested my going to the Hotel Maraviglia. Had I not gone, I should never have found out anything."

"And yet you have never seen her since that time?" retorted Detching with a tinge of bitterness, "Have you ever thanked her as you should have done?"

"Never," admitted Cahusac.

"Heavens! I should be ashamed to face the sun to-morrow if I had left all that splendid unselfishness, all her brave work without a word of gratitude!"

"I wrote to her," said Malcolm in a halting voice.

"Wrote to her!" repeated Detching angrily, "I saw that precious letter! You should have gone down on your knees to thank her! You should have followed her to the ends of the earth to show her what you felt about her grand friendship in those days! I thought I knew you, Malcolm, but you have cut a poor figure through this affair."

"Perhaps you are right. It may be that your view of it is the right one," replied Cahusac, humbly, "but you don't know the whole case, nor how it was and is with me. I had babbled of my ideals,—I had told her of Alice. Long before I would allow it to myself, I loved Lorrie. I realise it now. She stood by me through my troubles, she was my comrade when things looked blackest; she planned for me, she spurred me on, she gave me courage. I am not such a dull dog as you take me for, Detching. Long, long ago I

knew that I loved her! But after all that had passed between us about — about another, how was I to go to her? I knew that if once I saw her I should lose myself. I knew that if I tried to thank her, I could not have hidden all the rest! Why, man, you have been through the mill yourself. What would you have had me do?"

"You must be your own judge," replied Detching, "I daresay we were both destined to be unlucky. But after losing a woman like that, there is not much in life to look forward to. But I'm used to it."

Malcolm listened in amazement for the whole trend of this talk was entirely unlike Detching. All the more, he was influenced by his grey outlook on life and it may be that his friend was not grumbling so much at random as it seemed.

"To look on at other people's lives becomes a bit of a bore in the end, of course."

"Worse and worse every year you live!" commented Detching. Then drawing out his watch, he said: "By the way, Cahusac, I've promised to go out to tea this afternoon."

"What?" exclaimed Malcolm.

"One mustn't play bear in one's den in a lonely place like this, you know, one must be human — if one can. But you needn't come."

Malcolm was both perplexed and amused, he was unprepared for the developments he found in his friend. "Of course I'll come," said he.

"Oh, well, just as you like."

On leaving the cottage they turned inland and, mounting a second line of cliff, looked down upon a hollow, in which stood a house with a meadow of daffodils at its feet and a dark cloak of woods half-flung round both. They passed down the winding road that twined outside the wood and entered a deeply-cut, sheltered path whose mossy walls were embossed with primroses.

Detching was following Malcolm, and at a sharp turn of the path, he saw ahead of them a woman gathering wild flowers in a basket. Swiftly and silently as a wild creature, he turned in his tracks and vanished. Malcolm strode on.

The woman, hearing his footsteps raised herself and looked up with eyes of deep cornflower blue. At sight of him the blood flowed and ebbed in her face.

Malcolm stood quite still. It was Lorrie and if he had not already known how deeply and wholly he loved her, he must have learned it now. For a moment he saw her in a mist, cloud-wrapped and divine; then she was the woman he loved, whom he worshipped and desired.

He was at her side, looking down into her face. "Lorrie! It is a lifetime since I saw you!"

She smiled at him with the old rallying smile that had always enchanted him. How was it in the past days he had never realised how desperately he loved her?

"If you wanted me, why did you not come to me?" said she.

Detching, as he walked away up the hill, heard the happy echo of a laugh.

"The last act of the play, love and wedding-bells!" he thought. "It is time for the scene-shifter to drop out."

THE END

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